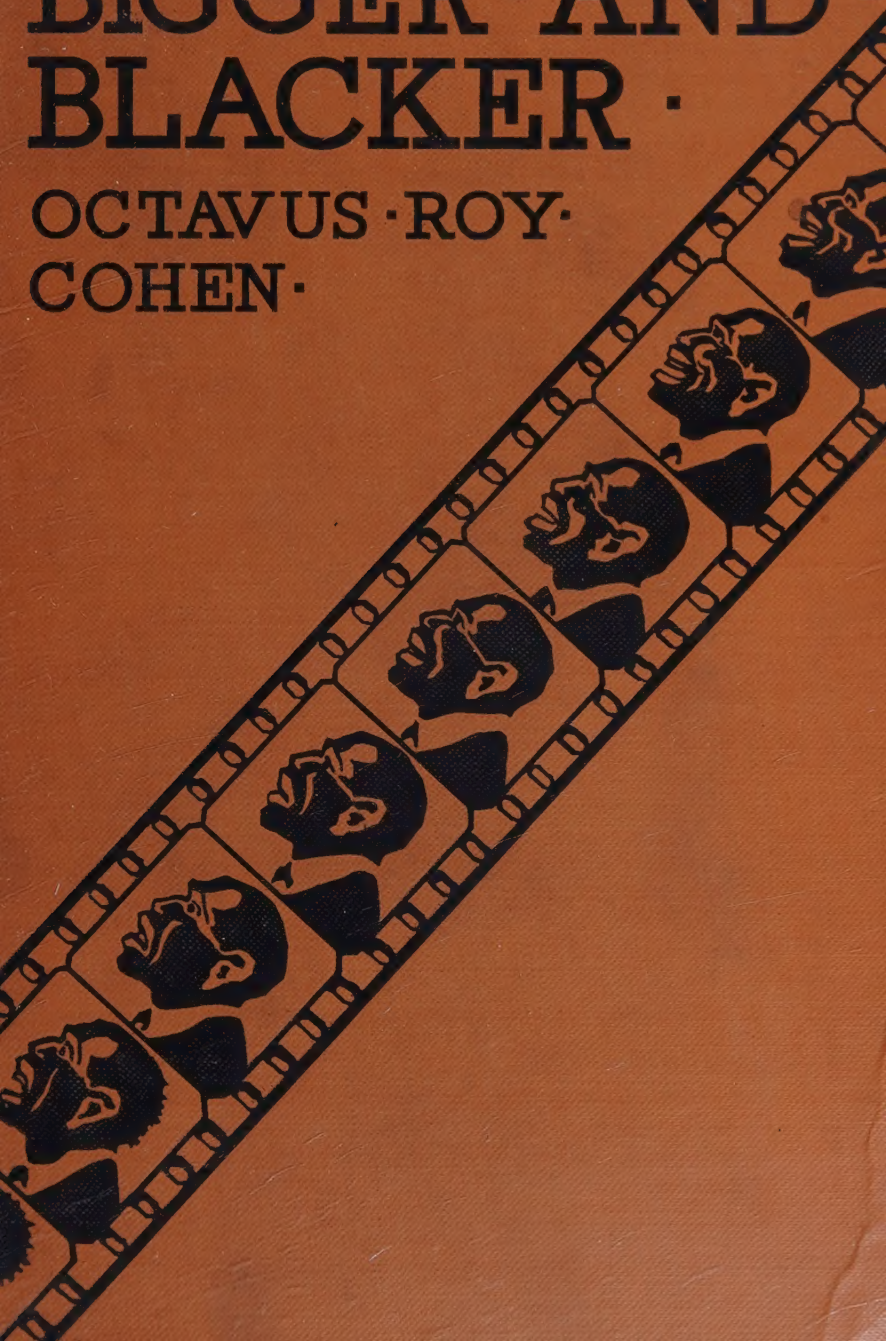


# BIGGER · AND · BLACKER ·

OCTAVUS · ROY ·  
COHEN ·








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*BIGGER AND BLACKER*



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# *BIGGER AND BLACKER*

By

OCTAVUS ROY COHEN

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BOSTON

LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY

1925



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To  
CARL BRANDT



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*BIGGER AND BLACKER*



## *I. Every Little Movie*

The sun shone, birdies twittered merrily, flowers cast their fragrance upon the smoke-laden air of Birmingham, and Eddie Quartz knew that there was naught in the world save happiness. Of late, life had been very kind to the dapper Mr. Quartz. In a single bound he had risen from the lowly estate of iceman to the eminence of a stock salesman; and whereas his decided lack of physical strength had caused him to be a distinctly second-rate chap-eron to hundred-pound blocks of frozen water, he was proving a very excellent dispenser of handsomely engraved certificates.

There were several reasons why Eddie made a good salesman. In the first place he despised the ice business and had long yearned to be emancipated therefrom; in the second place, as an aspirant to the hand of the wealthy and pulchritudinous Iodinah Jones, he had discovered that the somber habiliments of the ice-vending profession were not eyed with approval; and in the third and last place, Eddie believed passionately in the thing which he now strove to sell.

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There was no slightest doubt in the mind of Eddie Quartz that purchase of stock in the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., was the most gilt-edgest investment since Liberty Bonds sold at 83, wherefore he carried into his sales campaign a passionate conviction which developed frequent sales and luscious commissions. He was certain that the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., was destined to revolutionize the two-reel-picture business, and he gazed raptly into the dim, distant future, visualizing himself as a portly and prosperous stockholder in that organization, supporting, by virtue of his tiny stockholdings, the now somewhat unattainable Iodinah Jones.

Fortunately for Eddie's tranquillity of soul, it was not given to him to know the inner turmoil which was causing frequent conferences and headachy worry on the part of the officials of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. He did not dream, for instance, that the company had commenced operations on the proverbial shoe string and that the shoe string gave promise of becoming somewhat frayed.

Headed by the pompous and portly Orifice R. Latimer, of Chicago, the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., had descended upon Birmingham two months since, converted an old and dilapidated warehouse into a studio,

equipped it with amazing lights and commenced shooting the first of a proposed series of two-reel comedies of Negroes, by Negroes and for the universe.

Birmingham's Darktown went wild with enthusiasm. Here was something so new that it defied conjecture; something so amazing as to be beyond belief; something so interesting as to afford a never-ending topic of conversation. Local talent was drawn upon for minor rôles and extra work. Colored carpenters and mechanics were given jobs and received magnificent wages. The new company radiated optimism and prosperity, and when a stock campaign was launched there were many who were eager to subscribe.

Of the three stock solicitors who worked for the Midnight on a strictly commission basis, Eddie Quartz had been the most signally successful. But even his unflagging persistence was not proof against the adamant skepticism of those who failed to subscribe with the first rush and sat back to await results. Colored Birmingham was interested, but colored Birmingham was also inclined to be somewhat canny and it wished to see a dividend or two before investing heavily.

That this sudden cessation of stock buying might embarrass the Midnight Pictures Cor-



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poration, Inc., never occurred to the effervescent Eddie Quartz. He considered that he performed a personal favor for each person to whom he sold a fifty-dollar share of stock. He was strictly of the company, his personal interest in its success being not one whit lessened by the fact that his beloved Iodinah was playing a small part in their first picture, a rough-and-tumble comedy which bore the title of *Black Cat Luck*.

He did not know, for instance, that for more than a fortnight certain powerful forces had been at work to cause him misery. He knew nothing of the conference which had taken place fourteen days previously between President Orifice R. Latimer, Director J. Cæsar Clump, and Mr. Opus Randall, ponderous masculine star of the company.

"Gemmun"—it was the president speaking—"we is gettin' along fine, but we ain't got no money."

Opus Randall struck an attitude.

"How come?" he asked pointedly.

"These Bumminham folks ain't buyin' stock like they ought to."

"But, Mistuh Latimer——"

"Don't but me, big boy. All the conversin' in the world don't git us a dollar. An' s'posin' I did tell you us was feenancially solvent, don't

you reckon I was obleeged to say that in order to git you down here makin' pitchers? That was business. P'int is now that us needs money an' needs it quick."

J. Cæsar Clump, putteed and goggled, leaned forward.

"We is most finished with Black Cat Luck," he vouchsafed. "When we sell it——"

"When! What you means is if. I takes it to New Yawk next week, but the chances are they ain't no distributor gwine buy one pitcher. An' doesn't they do so, we ain't got the cash to go ahaid with another unless us sells a heap mo' stock. Black Cat Luck cost about seven thousan' dollars to make. Us needs another seven thousan'."

Mr. Randall looked at Mr. Clump and Mr. Clump looked at Mr. Randall. Then both turned reproving glances upon the portly gentleman who had contracted to pay them fairly sizable salaries.

"Cain't be got," pronounced the director sadly.

"They ain't no such word as 'can't' in my hexagon," snapped the president. "Which is how come I to call this confe'ence."

Star and director hitched their chairs forward.

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"Shoot!" invited Mr. Clump.

"Hmph!" Orifice R. Latimer snipped the end from a black cigar, lighted it and inhaled luxuriously. "Opus, you is the man which can do somethin'."

"What 'tis?"

"In yo' comp'ny is a young lady—Miss Iodinah Jones."

The eyes of Opus Randall glittered.

"Boss man, you said a-plenty. Ol' Venus D. Milo is a small-timer alongside that gal when it comes to looks."

"Yas-suh, Opus, an' when you utters them words you ain't half started to talk. Now I asks you a question, Opus, same bein' this: Is you aware that Iodinah's daddy, Mistuh Noble Jones, is pretty near the richest cullud man in Bumminham?"

"Says so?"

"Uh-huh. Ain't you noticed that gal drivin' to the studjo ev'y day in her own flivver coop? Ain't you inspected them rings an' that wrist watch what she wears? Man, Noble Jones is so rich that gittin' hol' of some of his money is the onliest thing us needs to make suttin that we gits a chance to put this comp'ny over."

"Yes; but I is an actor."

"Also, you is the heaviest lover I has ever met up with. They ain't no cullud gal c'n hol'

out against you. Tha's where you comes in at, see?"

A deep silence fell upon the gathering. Opus Randall **smiled** slowly.

"I commences to see what you elucidates, Brother Latimer. You kinder has the idee that was Iodinah Jones to fall fo' me, her daddy would be interested feenancial in the company which bofe I an' she wuks in. Ain't that it?"

"Brother Randall, perception is the on'y thing you ain't got nothin' else but."

"So I rushes the daughter an' gits in with the ol' man an' convinces him that he oughter invest—yeh; but what does I git out of it?"

"Regalar sales commission, an' a good job when the comp'ny keeps fum goin' bust, an' a good-lookin' gal. Ain't that enough?"

"Well, it seems——"

Mr. Orifice R. Latimer could be hard-boiled upon occasion.

"Does you refuse," he snapped, "you gits nothin' an' won't even be able to keep that. Comp'ny goes flooie, job ceases, an' you don't even git car fare back to Chicago. Says what now?"

There was but one thing Mr. Randall could say. After all, he did not entirely dislike the task, and he yearned to keep his present job. Wherefore he formally entered the lists; but so

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subtly did he work that it was two weeks before the beatitude of Eddie Quartz was rived by knowledge that he had a rival.

The knowledge came as a considerable shock to Eddie, for that enthusiastic little stock salesman considered himself engaged to the fair and affluent Iodinah. True, Mr. Noble Jones, Iodinah's male progenitor, had never formally given his consent to the match. His refusal had first been based upon an unwillingness to see his daughter united in wedlock to an ice-man, and later through a canny desire to see how Eddie's present company developed; but as between Mr. Quartz and Miss Jones, there was a delicious understanding.

There came two weeks of fast and furious work at the studio. J. Cæsar Clump was a decidedly efficient picture man with a well-balanced sense of dramatic and comedy values, and he drove the company almost frantic with retakes.

At length *Black Cat Luck* was completed, cut and titled, and Mr. Orifice R. Latimer departed with the precious negative for the film market in New York; whereupon the studio of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., went temporarily dead.

During this final two weeks Mr. Opus Randall neglected no opportunity to impress upon



Iodinah his own desirability. It was plain, too, that he was making considerable headway. Iodinah, a recruit from local amateur ranks, responded eagerly to the honor of being singled out by this magnificent satellite of filmdom for particular personal attention. It gave her a prestige greater than any she had ever before known. Not that she was false to the bewildered and miserable Eddie Quartz; but, after all, Eddie was a gentleman of distinct limitations. Besides, Opus Randall and Noble Jones got along famously. It was plain that Mr. Jones considered Opus some pumpkins, and Opus let it be understood that he was quite willing to be regarded as a friend of Birmingham's wealthy colored citizen.

Eddie Quartz circulated around the Jones homestead like a bantam rooster suddenly bereft of his head. He didn't know what it was all about, and was more than a trifle frightened. Once he cornered his lady fair and put the question direct.

"Iodinah, don't you love me no mo'?"

"I don't do nothin' else, Eddie."

"But you ain't leavin' me see much of you."

"Shuh! I reckon you is gwine see plenty of me after we is ma'ied."

"After we is ma'ied! All the time you make talk 'bout after we is ma'ied, an' we ain't no

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closer to bein' such than when I was totin' ice."

"We is too."

"Tha's what you says, but how do I know them words gits us anywheres? How comes you to be traipsin' round with this heah Opus Randall all the time?"

Iodinah's eyes narrowed speculatively.

"Is you jealous of he?"

"Ain't I got a right to be?"

"Well, not ezac'ly."

"That don't mean nothin'. I asks you, Is I is or is I ain't?"

"He's an awful swell feller."

"Swell is right. Does he swell any mo' he's gwine bust. I ain't never sawn a man which thinks as much of hisse'f as Opus Randall does. An' you joy ridin' around with him nighttimes in a be-yo'-own-driver car which he rents."

"He's he'pin' me with my art."

"Yo' which?"

"My art."

"Goodness goshness, Miss Agnes! Where at does you git that art stuff fum?"

Iodinah was inclined to resent his voice.

"Don't see where you gits off at 'scussin' art. Ain't I an actor in that comp'ny, an' ain't Opus Randall the big star, an' cain't he show me how to act better'n I does?"

"Yeh"—pessimistically—"or wuss."

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"Now listen at me, Eddie Quartz! Us ain't ma'ied yet, an' I ain't gwine stan' fo' you castin' aversions on which gemmun I chooses to run round with. If Mistuh Randall craves my sassiety——"

"Leave him have it!" Eddie was a gentleman of more spirit than discretion. "Give him all of yo' sassiety he wants an' see does I care. Reckon tha's what kind of a gal you is. 'Long comes a big fat ol' buzzard with a mustache an' you right off quits me. Well, you go right ahaid an'——"

Iodinah Jones did. When Eddie Quartz showed up at the Jones home on Avenue F the following night he found Noble Jones seated on the porch perusing a late popular novel.

"Where Iodinah is at, Mistuh Jones?"

"Out."

"Who with?"

"Opus Randall."

Eddie emitted a groan.

"That ol' hunk of overdressed side meat! Wonder what she sees in him."

"Opus is a fine man."

"Pff!"

"An' a great actor."

Eddie was honest.

"I ain't never said he couldn't act. I ain't got a lick of use fo' him, but I seen Black Cat

## *Bigger and Blacker*

Luck an' like to busted a suspender laughin' at how funny he done."

The lips of Noble Jones expanded into an appreciative grin.

"That shuah is the funniest pitcher I ever set eyes on. The things that happens to that feller after he trips over that black cat! Folks tell me they is gwine make a lot of money out of that comp'ny, Eddie."

Eddie had not long been a stock salesman, but he possessed the correct instinct. He detected in the voice of his lady friend's father an I-want-to-be-convinced nuance; whereupon Eddie Quartz went to it. Not only did he yearn to sell a sizable block of stock but also he earnestly believed that the proposition was a good one, and that the surest way to enlist Noble's sympathy in his courtship would be by doing him the enormous favor of putting him on the company's books as a stockholder.

"Mistuh Jones, how much money the Midnight is gwine make is goin' to make a flivver fact'ry look cheap."

"You reckon?"

"Ise shuah. Lots of real wise folks has bought stock a'ready an' they is the ones I envy. Ise on'y sorry you ain't one of them."

Noble Jones was cautious.

"There's plenty of time."

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"Tha's what you says. Maybe they is an' maybe they ain't."

"How come?"

"Just thisaway. S'posin' they sell this Black Cat pitcher right offen the reel, does you reckon they's gwine dispose any mo' stock outside? I reckon they ain't. Nossuh, they's gwine keep it all fo' themse'ves, an' you know it."

"But s'posin' this pitcher don't sell."

"Then the next one will."

"S'posin' none of them don't sell."

"Foolish talk what you murmurs with yo' mouf, Mistuh Jones. Ain't you sawn that pitcher with yo' ve'y own eyes, an' ain't it better than a heap of the pitchers what you sees at the Champion an' the Frolic?"

"Well, yes."

"An' didn't they sell?"

"Yes."

"Then why ain't this one gwine sell also?"

The logic was unanswerable. Also, Mr. Jones was in a highly receptive mood. The get-rich-quick germ was biting. Opus Randall had paved the way for Eddie's sales onslaught by surfeiting Noble with details of enormous fortunes turned over quickly and safely in the moving-picture game. Besides, this particular project was hitting very close

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to home. Noble Jones had a single passion in life—his daughter. And there was no denying the fact that Iodinah gave promise of developing into a very competent actress. It was a matter of pride to own a portion of the company in which she was to act, and Opus had made it quite clear that should Noble Jones ever become a stockholder, Iodinah's future would be assured. Of course, Opus had as yet done nothing so fearfully crude as to suggest that Noble buy in—not yet.

Eddie Quartz believed implicitly in the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. His entire personal savings had been invested therein. His enthusiasm was communicated to Noble Jones, chiefly perhaps because Noble Jones desired to be convinced. Forgotten was Iodinah; forgotten everything save the glittery prospectus issued by the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. Their heads bent close under the porch light. Eddie was atremble with eagerness; the biggest fish of all was nibbling at his hook.

“Ten thousan’ anyway, Mistuh Jones.”

“Hush yo’ mouf, little man. I woul’n’t invest ten thousan’ dollars in United States mints.”

“Ought to. Two hund’ed poussent profit an-  
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nual; that'd be twen'y thousan' dollars a year income fo' life."

"Woul'n't know what to do with all that money."

"Iodinah——"

"She's got ev'ything she wants now. Boy, I wukked hahd fo' which money I has got an' I ain't aimin' to lose a big slice of it all at once."

"Take a chance, Mistuh Jones."

"I got a friend which took a chance one night when he was drivin' an automobile, an' he coincided with a train."

"Eight thousan'?"

"Nope. Two thousan', maybe."

"Shuh! Two thousan' ain't fitten fo' yo' dignity. Seven?"

"Th'ee."

"Six?"

"Fo'."

"Tell you what Ise willin' to do," proclaimed Eddie magnanimously. "Ise willin' to assept an order fo' five thousan'."

Such generosity could not fail to appeal to Noble Jones. He hesitated, and was lost. Five minutes later he had formally executed an order for five thousand dollars' worth of stock in the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc.



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The order was very binding, indeed: a non-cancelable promissory note effective upon the delivery of one hundred shares of stock.

Trembling with excitement, Eddie Quartz rose to go, and as he did so his eyes fell upon the figures of Opus Randall and Iodinah. Noble saw them, too, and he laid a pleading hand on Eddie's arm.

"One favor I asts you, Eddie."

"Yas-suh?"

"Don't breathe no word of this to nobody; not even to Iodinah."

"How come?"

"I craves to keep it a secret. Maybe some day I gives this heah stock to Iodinah fo' a weddin' present."

"Hot dam! What you asts, Mistuh Jones, is a cinch. An' I don't know nothin' that would make a better weddin' present fo' yo' pretickeler daughter."

At the gate the departing Eddie came face to face with his magniloquent rival.

"Evenin', Mistuh Randall."

"Hello, li'l' bit." Opus smiled disdainfully. "Has you been callin' on Miss Iodinah?"

"Nope"—genially. "N'r neither I ain't been waitin' on her."

Eddie strutted down the street. Miss Jones stared reflectively after him, a qualm of uncer-



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tainty tincturing hurt pride. For the first time she doubted the power of her charms over the dapper Mr. Quartz, and at the same moment her personal interest in Opus Randall lessened.

Eddie made his way down Eighteenth Street to Bud Peaglar's Barbecue Lunch Room and Billiard Parlor. There he found the debonair Florian Slappey engaged in the gentle art of financing himself for the following day by means of his skill at the game of Kelly pool. Eddie unracked a cue, paid two bits, accepted a pill from the Kelly bottle and joined in. He shot with reckless abandon and astounding luck.

"Shoot yo' ball, large man. 'Tain't gwine do you no good, 'cause ev'rything comes my way to-night. Good Luck is my middle name an' Ise a whole fambly. Yonder goes the sevum, leavin' me presition on the eight. Eight rock, listen at yo' daddy! Heah me, eight rock. In you goes! Boys, pay me!"

When Bud closed his place an hour later Eddie was richer by ten dollars. He and Florian absorbed two barbecue sandwiches apiece and strolled home together. Mr. Slappey was interested.

"Happy, Eddie?"

"Them is true words, Florian."

"'Tain't Iodinah, is it?"

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"Nope. Ise done with chasin' wimmin."

"Wise wisdom what you utters."

"Ain't it so? This is my big day, Florian."

"Reckon"—enviously—"that maybe you has got you a better job with that pitcher company."

"Any job is good with them folks. Tha's the money makin'est comp'ny what is."

"Wisht I could buy a li'l' stock."

"Wisht you could."

Florian sighed.

"Ise busted, dawg-gone it! Some folks has all the luck."

"Uh-huh, an' I has even mo'."

The slumber which came to Eddie Quartz that night was deep and untroubled. He waked early, dressed, ate a sizable breakfast and trotted down to the Penny Prudential Bank Building, where the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., maintained its executive offices. He was bursting with the pride of achievement as he left the elevator and slammed in through the ground-glass door.

Then he paused. The tableau within the room reeked of melancholy. At the desk of the absent president sat the director, Mr. J. Cæsar Clump, putteed feet on the near-mahogany desk top. The light brown, bobbed-hair stenographer chewed her gum silently and

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sadly. Withering rays of depression emanated from the large person of Opus Randall, star extraordinary.

Eddie Quartz frowned and the proclamation of his triumph with Noble Jones remained unspoken.

"Who died?" he queried.

J. Cæsar Clump answered briefly, "Us."

"Says which?"

"Looka heah."

He extended a yellow slip of paper. Eddie Quartz perused the night letter; a dire message from President Orifice R. Latimer:

"J. Cæsar Clump,  
Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc.,  
Penny Prudential Bank Building,  
Birmingham, Alabama.

"Black Cat Luck flopped by two biggest distributors. They insist on at least six before contracting. Only one hope left. For gosh sake sell some stock or us is busted.

Orifice R. Latimer."

Unversed as he was in the workings of the photo-play industry, Eddie Quartz understood. Black Cat Luck was a bust; the distributors were unconvinced and would not buy. The essential immediate cash returns were not forthcoming. He could not at once understand the details, but he did know that things

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were not as they should be. In a second he crashed from the zenith of elation to the nadir of misery. Instinct warned him to keep silent about the binding order which reposed in his pocket; something told him that it would be inadvisable from many standpoints to involve his hoped-for father-in-law in a transaction with a fast expiring company.

He returned the fateful telegram to Mr. Clump and turned away.

"Where you goin', Eddie?"

"Out."

"Comin' back?"

"Dunno."

"Don't mention to nobody——"

"I woul'n't. Believe me, not."

He mourned down the street, fretting with his problem. In his pocket was the equivalent of five thousand dollars in cash for the company, for, though the money had not yet been paid, the order was a binding contract of sale and delivery and Noble Jones was financially substantial.

That five thousand dollars might mean salvation to the company. Eddie had lost no confidence in it, albeit he had developed a vast contempt for the distributors in New York who refused to see the cash merits of Black Cat Luck.

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But suppose he delivered the order to the company and they collected from Noble Jones—and then the company went on the rocks. Gone then would be his last chance for the hand of the delectable Iodinah, and Iodinah was quite the fondest person he was of. Of course, he could destroy the Jones order and so save that person his five thousand dollars and consequently win his undying gratitude; but perhaps by so doing he would be robbing the Midnight of its sole chance for affluent existence.

“There ain’t but two things fo’ me to do,” reflected Eddie miserably, “an’ the on’y thing which is wuss than one is the other.”

Pending the result of his debate with himself, Eddie Quartz went to his room, where, after prolonged thought, he decided that for the moment his best play was to do nothing whatever, whereupon he secreted the Noble Jones stock order in the tray of his trunk.

“Maybe——” he thought. “Who c’n tell?”

But if the catastrophe forecast by Orifice Latimer’s telegram had brought indecision to Eddie Quartz it had had quite the opposite effect upon Opus Randall, star of the ill-fated picture company. Mr. Randall left the Penny Prudential Bank Building and started for the

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home of Noble Jones, his brow furrowed with vertical lines of grim determination.

Opus Randall had spent an eventful life looking out for Opus Randall. He had started his professional career as chore boy with a street carnival sixteen years before. Since then he had tried anything and everything with varying degrees of luck. The elevation to stardom with the Midnight organization had followed a depressing experience in a colored musical comedy; until this morning, it seemed that he had landed in the soft spot which had been his life's goal.

Now, however, all had changed. The sunshine was dimming and Opus realized that he had not made sufficient hay.

Opus had a plan. It did not augur well for the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., but it did promise results for Opus Randall. The plan had to do with Miss Iodinah Jones and her wealthy father.

Opus had been intrusted with the task of enlisting the financial aid of Noble Jones. Ergo, Noble Jones was a wealthy man. In that campaign Opus had dazzled Miss Iodinah with his magnificence. Now that the company had crashed, what was more natural than that he should shift his objective from the company to himself—in brief, that he should marry Iodinah

and win for Opus Randall the cash money which had been needed to replenish the barren coffers of the Midnight?

By instinct, Opus was not much given to marrying; women interested him only in the abstract and thus far in his checkered career he had avoided matrimonial pitfalls. Now, however, he found himself in a strategic position to make an excellent match. Iodinah was quite pleasing to the eye and appeared to have all the qualifications which Opus felt he was entitled to demand from a wife. Besides, her dowry would be no mean sum, particularly if Mr. Randall's scheme worked. Being cautious, he sought Noble before committing himself definitely.

"Evenin', Mistuh Jones."

"Evenin', Brother Randall. Does you crave to see my daughter?"

"Direc'ly, brother, direc'ly; right now I aims to make talk with you."

"I is flattered. Have a cigar?"

"Thanks. Smoke it later." Opus leaned forward and laid an affectionate hand on the skinny knee of his prospective father-in-law.

"I like you, Brother Jones."

"An' my likin' fo' you, Brother Randall, is just as mutual."



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"In fact," went on the imperturbable Opus, "I kind of likes yo' whole fambly."

"I knowed that."

"I like you-all so much, Brother Jones, that I has come to do you a favor."

"Favors is the most things I like to have done fo' me."

"Good! Now this heah favor, Brother Jones, has got to remain a secret between I and you."

"Tha's right, Opus; it shuah do."

"Brother Jones, I has a hunch that you is prospectin' 'bout investin' some money in the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. Am I correc'?"

Noble Jones straightened in his chair.

"Uh-huh. Why?"

"Well, just this; an', mind you, I woul'n't say this on'y fo' how friendly I feels to you an' yo' daughter. I says to you earnest, Brother Jones, don't you go investin' a nickel with that comp'ny."

"But, Opus——"

"They ain't no buttin' about this. It's posolute. Money what you invests in that company is like money th'owed away, on'y you don't git the same fun."

"Sufferin' tripe! Catastrophes what you says with yo' lips!"



## *Every Little Movie*

"This mawnin' we gits a wire from Orifice Latimer that Black Cat Luck has done been flopped. Nobody ain't gwine buy it."

Noble unleashed a hollow groan.

"Is you suttin'?"

"Never was mo' positiver of nothin' in all my life. Now my advice, Mistuh Jones, is that you should take how much money you was gwine invest in that comp'ny, if any, and give it to Miss Iodinah for a ma'iage dowry, an'——"

"Just a minute, Opus. You preceeds too hasty. I asts you a question: Does Eddie Quartz knows that the comp'ny ain't no good?"

"Shuah he does. But that ain't what I was talkin' about. I was sayin'——"

"Nemmin' what you was sayin'. This Eddie Quartz——"

"I ain't studyin' 'bout Mistuh Quartz."

"Well, I is, an' if half of what I think 'bout that feller ever comes to pass they ain't gwine be enough left of him to lay a lily on."

Opus caught the tone of abject misery in the voice of his friend, and slowly the idea percolated. He clutched Noble's arm.

"You ain't sayin'——"

"Yes, I is."

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"You has done bought stock in the Mid-night?"

"Uh-huh."

"Off Eddie Quartz?"

"Lawd he'p me!"

"How much wuth?"

The voice was sepulchral.

"Five thousan' dollars."

"Oof!"

The men stared at each other. And then, trembling with horror, Noble Jones told the story of the signing of the five-thousand-dollar order.

"But you ain't paid no money, has you?"

"No; but that don't matter. I useter study law and I know what I signed. It's the same as gold unless I goes bankrupt."

"Oh, Lawsy!"

"An' to think of Eddie Quartz, which has been co'tin' my daughter——"

Opus was doing some swift thinking; an idea struck him. If Eddie had a five-thousand-dollar stock order, why had it not been turned in that morning? He recalled the expression of combined consternation and indecision on Eddie's face when the telegram had been shown him. Was it possible that Eddie Quartz was holding that order? He leaped to his feet and dragged Noble Jones with him.

## *Every Little Movie*

"Mistuh Jones, I has an idea."

"Oh, golly, my five thousan' dollars!"

"I craves to marry Iodinah."

"Eddie never should of done me thataway."

"You never would leave him ma'y her, would you?"

"Not less'n she craves to be a widder time she gits to be a bride."

"Good! Now s'pose I was to git aholt of that order an' return it back to you. If'n I was to do that, would you he'p me ma'y Iodinah?"

"I ain't forcin' her to ma'y nobody."

"But if'n she was willin'?"

"Opus, does you git me that order back, an' does Iodinah say she will ma'y you, I gives her five thousan' dollars fo' a weddin' present."

"Hot ziggity dam!" Opus Randall leaped for the door. "Watch my smoke, Noble! An' don't say nothin' to nobody."

"I won't, an' I'll repeat it frequent."

There was nothing hesitant in Opus Randall's procedure. He zipped to the company offices and discovered that no large stock subscription had been turned in by Eddie Quartz. Immediately he repaired to Sis Callie Flukers' boarding house, where Eddie maintained a room. He learned that Eddie was not at home and immediately went to Mr. Quartz's room.

## *Bigger and Blacker*

He knew that Noble's order was in one of two places; that it was either in Eddie's pocket or in his trunk. He found a key which opened the lock of the cheap trunk and five minutes later he catapulted through the door with the precious document in his possession.

Now things were as he wanted them, and he determined to make haste slowly. He held every ace in the deck and was not minded to play them thoughtlessly; there was Opus Randall to be considered and Opus was quite important to himself. He turned southward on Eighteenth Street and made toward the green slopes of Red Mountain, where the silent forest promised an excellent spot in which to sit and think.

Should he turn the order over to Noble and trust his luck to win the fair Iodinah? That idea was too fraught with uncertainty. Iodinah might not see things his way, and Noble's gratitude might not prove sufficiently enthusiastic to result in a cash reward.

Meanwhile Eddie Quartz completed his session of concentrated thinking. He ambled uncertainly to the office of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. And once again he paused in the doorway; for where that morning the atmosphere had been surcharged with depression, it was now electric. J. Cæsar Clump had

## *Every Little Movie*

forgotten his vast dignity and was fox-trotting about the room with the stenographer, and the leading woman was executing a skirt dance.

"What means it?" queried the bewildered Eddie. Cæsar Clump dropped his partner and slapped the little stock salesman on the back.

"Hot diggity dawg! Eddie, us is made!"

"Made which?"

"Made up. Looka heah."

Another telegram from New York, signed by Orifice R. Latimer:

"Transcontinental buys Black Cat Luck fifteen thousand cash. Contracts for five more same price, payable delivery each negative. Give orders no more stock to be sold. Returning immediately."

The shock of elation wilted Eddie's backbone. He collapsed weakly upon a chair and mopped a perspiring forehead with a lavender-bordered handkerchief.

"Undressed goldfish!" he murmured. "Kin it be true?" At length he rose and returned the telegram. "What he means 'bout not sellin' no mo' stock?"

"He means just that, Eddie. Us has got enough money to finance along. It's a hund'ed pussent proposition an' we ain't aimin' to let none of it git away. Black Cat Luck cos' seven thousan' dollars to projuce; we gits fifteen

## *Bigger and Blacker*

thousan' fo' it. Nex' pitcher won't even cost that much. Us is successful, an' so now you gimme them order blanks."

"All of 'em?"

"Ev'vy las' one. We don't crave to sell no mo' stock a-tall."

Eddie spoke uncertainly as he passed his order blanks over to the little director.

"I got a stock order yesterday, Mistuh Clump—a big one."

"Good! We accepts it. But tha's all. Where at that order is?"

"I gits it right away." Eddie exodusted abruptly and negotiated the distance between the Penny Prudential Bank Building and Sis Callie Flukers' boarding house in three seconds less than no time at all. He produced a key and ripped open the lid of his trunk. Nervous fingers quested for the order which was to win the undying gratitude of Noble Jones and the hand of Noble's daughter.

It was not there. It was most positively and completely absent. Eddie inspected more closely and his eyes opened wide with terror. It was patent that some one had visited his trunk, appallingly obvious that Noble Jones' order was gone.

This was the third and worst shock of a shocking day. In a trice Mr. Quartz's cosmic

## *Every Little Movie*

scheme went flooie. The order was gone; stock-subscription time at an end. And instead of the gratitude of Noble Jones, there was the certainty that Mr. Jones would never forgive him for the carelessness which permitted the theft of the now valuable order.

There was but one thing for Eddie Quartz to do, and he went about it with the same enthusiasm that a small boy exhibits toward visiting the dentist. Dragging one foot after the other, he turned toward the home of Noble Jones. Better to have the agony done with. No chance to get a new order from Noble and date it yesterday; J. Cæsar Clump had rendered that procedure impossible when he took the order blanks. Nothing to do but confess to Noble his own terrible error.

At the corner of Eighteenth Street and Avenue F he met Iodinah Jones. Her nose tip-tilted at sight of him and then her expression softened as she sensed his misery. He doffed his hat. "Good-by, Iodinah."

"Huh?"

"Good-by."

"Where you goin', Eddie?"

"Away."

"But where?"

"I dunno"—sadly—"but I know Ise goin'



## *Bigger and Blacker*

to get there quick. Right now I aims to make talk with yo' father."

She laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Don't you do that, Eddie."

"I got to."

"Don't! Please! I ain't cravin' to ma'y no cawpse."

"That's just it. . . . Say, look yonder. Ain't that Opus Randall goin' in yo' house?"

She grimaced with distaste.

"'Tain't nobody else."

"Somethin' tells me, Iodinah sugar, I'd better be gittin' along. I never did like Opus."

"N'r neither I. An' he tol' Pa——"

"I reckon. Good-by."

"Ise goin' too, honey."

Together they entered the Jones home. In the living room they found Noble Jones and Opus Randall. Mr. Randall was in the midst of a flowery oration which had to do largely with the perfidious traits of one Eddie Quartz.

"Takin' yo' money fo' somethin' like this, Mistuh Jones—tha's what I calls a dirty trick. Now I shows you this bum stock order an' then you tears it up, which saves you five thousan' dollars."

Eddie stood motionless. His eyes were riveted upon the missing order. Suddenly he squealed and leaped across the room. Before



## *Every Little Movie*

either man knew he was there he had ripped the order from the hands of Opus Randall.

"Gimme! Gimme that! It's mine!"

Opus fell back in amazement. Noble Jones was not so inactive. He seized a poker and made for the excited Mr. Quartz.

"Gimme!" he demanded grimly.

"Give you which?"

"That order. Gimme or I busts you one."

"Foolishment what you talks with yo' mouf. I ain't gwine give you this to tear up."

"You better." The poker went slowly back.

"Listen at me, Mistuh Jones; just listen one minute befo' you extincs' me. I heard what this Opal Randall been tellin' you, an' I suspec's the rest. For all I know, he has been explainin' that the Midnight Corporation is flooie, ain't it?"

"Yeh, but——"

"An' maybe he's been astin' you fo' a reward on account he was savin' you fum a bad investment, huh?"

"Yeh, but——"

Briefly Eddie Quartz told the story of the sale of Black Cat Luck.

"And the wust of it is that Opus Randall must of knowed this all the time, Mistuh Jones. He's in with them fellers, an' all what he wanted to do was to git you to tear up that

## *Bigger and Blacker*

order yo' ownse'f so's you couldn't blame it on nobody else."

Noble Jones stared from Eddie Quartz to Opus and then back to Eddie again.

"Is that the troof, Eddie?"

"Cross my heart an' hope to bust."

"An' a'ready my stock makes a hund'ed pussent?"

"Uh-huh."

Noble's right hand took a firmer grip on the poker.

"Mistuh Randall——"

Opus knew that the cards were stacked against him; he backed precipitately through the door. And as he vanished Eddie grasped the hand of the fair Iodinah and turned toward Noble Jones.

"I gives you one last chance, Mistuh Jones; does you or does you not consent to me an' Iodinah makin' ma'iage with each other?"

Noble Jones gazed happily upon his stock order, affectionately upon his daughter and pridefully upon the beaming Eddie Quartz.

"I never used to think so awful much of you. Eddie, but I has changed my mind. Ise proud to have you as my son-in-law."

Eddie bowed.

"You is welcome, Mistuh Jones. An' some day Ise gwine esplain to you what a tough time

## *Every Little Movie*

I had fixin' up this li'l' deal so as you would git the best of it."

"Sugarfoot!" It was the rapturous Iodinah speaking. "You is plumb wonderful."

"Huh! You don't know how wonderful I is," responded Eddie Quartz. "In fact," he added candidly, "I don't even know myself, yet."



## *II. Double Double*

"Four aces," reflected Florian Slappey as he inspected his hand, "ain't no good unless you makes 'em such." The dealer, Lawyer Evans Chew, gazed inquiringly at the debonair little man on his left. Florian shook his head. "I pass," he murmured regretfully.

Once again he surveyed the five cards. The aces were present in force; large, juicy one-spots which silently prophesied fortune for the elegant Mr. Slappey. That young gentleman imperturbably swept the room with his eyes.

It was the regular Wednesday evening session of The Full House Social Club, augmented by two distinguished visitors. The first of these, J. Cæsar Clump by name, and by profession a motion-picture director, sat on the right of Lawyer Chew. He was an important personage, bedecked in riding breeches, shiny puttees, horn-rimmed goggles and a dainty little mustache; but withal he was likable, and a grin of friendship passed between himself and Florian.

The other stranger was not so popular with the gentleman who held the four aces. For one thing he out-Floriated Florian, and that was a

## *Bigger and Blacker*

sin of commission which Mr. Slappey found it impossible to forgive.

Welford Potts sat on Florian's left. He was garbed in a manner which would have caused the historic raiment of one Solomon to appear as sackcloth and ashes. Mr. Potts was a proud and dignified person with an insufferable intolerance which befitted his position in Birmingham as featured leading man of a series of two-reel comedies of and by Negroes which were being produced locally by The Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. These photoplays had already made a very substantial success as program releases in more than one hundred first-class houses throughout the country.

Welford Potts was inclined to be unreasonably fond of himself. He took himself seriously and demanded that the world make it unanimous. Unquestionably he was attractive to the eye—albeit those who knew him intimately were prone to suggest that a vacuum made fertile soil upon which to grow a handsome countenance. Above everything else he despised Florian Slappey, for the shiek of Eighteenth Street had persistently and pointedly refused to kowtow to the screen celebrity, and even, on occasion, had sneered at him in public.

In return therefor, Welford Potts made it

plain that he considered Mr. Slappey as the dust beneath his feet, which attitude did not engender any love for Mr. Potts in the breast of Florian. At the moment, Welford was riding high on the crest of a tidal wave of social adulation while Florian was almost forgotten—wherefore he yearned to show Mr. Potts the spot at which he might most ignominiously alight.

It had been Florian's suggestion that Mr. Potts be invited to attend the weekly session of The Full House Social Club. Welford was certain that he was a magnificent poker player, and Florian, figuring that he had never sat in with the Full House crowd, believed that some one of them—preferably himself—could pick the visiting celebrity clean. Wherefore Mr. Slappey cannily passed his four aces and hungrily watched the emotionful Welford Potts. Florian knew that he held a large bludgeon in his hand; if only opportunity presented itself——

"I pass," echoed Welford Potts.

"By me," pronounced Doctor Brutus Herring.

"An' me," chimed in Semore Mashby.

Terror struck Florian's heart. Suppose nobody held a hand as strong as jacks? Suppose

## *Bigger and Blacker*

no one opened? Then came the symphonic voice of J. Cæsar Clump.

"Opens fo' two bits."

Lawyer Chew tossed in a red chip. Florian hesitated, then followed suit. A large grin overspread the vapid features of the motion-picture star.

"Raises two bits," shrilled Welford.

Florian sneered to himself. "The po' piece of tripe!" he anathematized. "He's either got a double-ended straight or a fo'-flush an' he raises on the off chance. Well——"

Doctor Herring stood the raise; the tight-fisted Semore Mashby laid down a small pair; J. Cæsar Clump reraised a quarter and Lawyer Chew rode. Again Florian made a great play of uncertainty, and again he merely met the raise. Once more Welford Potts boosted the pot a quarter, but this time he was called.

"Cards?" queried Lawyer Chew.

"Takes two," snapped Florian, then appeared to reconsider. "Make it one."

"Holdin' a kicker?" asked the dealer, flipping him a card.

"Kickers is the fondest things I is of," came Florian's Delphic answer.

Welford Potts took one card and Florian, watching closely, saw an expression of rapture cross the movie actor's face, whereat Mr.



Slappey sang silently with joy. "He filled, dawg-gone his hide! He filled his flush, an' now watch him git what's comin'."

The other cards were dealt. J. Cæsar Clump tapped on the table. "Check to them one-card draws."

Lawyer Chew followed suit, and Florian did likewise. Welford Potts tossed a yellow chip into the pot.

"One dollar," he exulted.

"Sufferin' sidemeat!" wailed Florian. "Is you gone plumb crazy—th'owin' dollars in thataway?"

Welford withered Florian with a glance. "I ain't used to playin' poker with paupers, neither welshers, Mistuh Slappey. Is my game too steep fo' you, you is privilege' to git out."

"Big talk what you makes with yo' mouf. What you does, Doctor Herring?"

"I drop."

"And I," repeated Cæsar Clump.

"Also me," boomed Lawyer Chew. "My th'ee treys ain't no good against that flush."

"Flush," sneered Florian. "He ain't got no flush. How come you fellers let this imitation of a regular man run you out?"

Welford Potts stared eagerly at Florian. "You think I is bluffin'?"

"I ain't shuah," returned Mr. Slappey. "I

## *Bigger and Blacker*

useter think it took brains fo' that. But just the same, I don't believe you has got what yo' dollar says you has."

"Humph! Talkin' is the one thing you don't do nothin' else but. Does I take the pot?"

"I dunno."

"Money talks, my man."

"Yo' man! A'right, le's see who's a welsher now. I raises you a dollar."

"Right back at you," said Welford, tossing in two yellows. "How you like that, Mistuh Big-Mouf."

Florian paused, simulating great agony. Inwardly he was exultant. Welford Potts had fallen neatly into a clever trap. The best that Mr. Potts could have was a full, and that was extremely unlikely, since Florian did not attribute to the actor gentleman sufficient poker adroitness to have refused to open on two pairs. A flush then.

"I don't believe yet you has got it. Raises you back a dollar."

"An' a dollar mo'."

"Loose man what you is with yo' money. You don't care how much you th'ows away."

"N'r neither I don't care how much I takes fum you."

Florian's brow wrinkled in thought. The others were leaning forward tensely. They all

figured Florian as he wanted them to—that he had filled a straight or a flush.

“Ise got it, Mistuh Potts.”

“Money talks.”

“Raises you another yaller.”

“An’ I returns them compliment.”

The pot grew amid considerable conversation. Florian was beatific; the club which he held was belaboring Welford Potts just where it could do the most good, and Florian was enjoying himself hugely.

“Why don’t you call, actor man?”

“I never calls.”

“Me neither. Up a dollar.”

Fifty dollars in the pot; sixty. Lawyer Evans Chew called a halt. “Le’s show down,” he urged. The players protested, but Lawyer Chew, as president of the club, insisted. “Us aims to play a li’l’ bit. What you got, Welford?”

“My name,” snapped the actor, “is Mistuh Potts.”

“Goodness Goshness, Miss Agnes, how much dignity that gemmun has got!” grinned Florian.

“Pff!” sneered Welford. “Hoi polloi!”

“Same to you. What has you?”

“Flush!” grinned Welford proudly.

“Po’ boy.” And now Florian gave full vent

## *Bigger and Blacker*

to his exultation. "Read these an weep, cullud man."

The four aces were turned face up. There was a gasp from the gathering.

"Fo' big ones. Sweet smoke!"

"That," explained Florian magniloquently as he reached for the pot, "is what us folks in Bummin'ham calls playin' poker, Mistuh Potts. Any time you craves a few lessons call aroun' on me, an'——"

"Just a minute, Useless." A sudden dignity settled upon the narrow shoulders of the doll-like actor. "They is somethin' I fo'got to mention."

"What?"

"My flush," explained Mr. Potts cheerfully, "is all lined up. Six, sevum, eight, nine an' ten of hearts."

Florian gasped. He experienced a horrible sinking sensation at the pit of his tummy. The smoke-laden room whirled as he saw his bubble burst. And then some one laughed; that was the unkindest cut of all. As from a distance came the cool insulting voice of Welford Potts.

"When I comes to you fo' them lessons, Mistuh Slappeg, I pays you with some of this heah money."

Florian tried to smile, but the effort was

sickly. He cashed an I O U for twenty-five dollars and remained in the game, but he played pallidly. Eventually even his I O U found its way to the stack confronting Welford Potts. Florian retired from the game and they called it a night.

He strolled down the street arm in arm with J. Cæsar Clump, director for The Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. Mr. Slappey was dazed by the catastrophe.

"Bah!" he ejaculated, "that man cain't play poker."

"Nope," agreed Cæsar.

"All the time he had me thinkin' he didn't have nothin' but a flush."

"He didn't do nothin' else."

"An' then he busts down on me with—oh, Lawsy! What I is up against is it."

"Broke?"

"Absotively. Man! I is so broke that was automobile tires sellin' fo' nothin' apiece, I couldn't even buy myse'f a puncture."

"He did kinder put them hooks to you."

"He di'n't do nothin'. That Welford Potts gives me such a pain. Don't talk to me about him no mo'."

Cæsar inspected his companion. "You an' Welford is about the same size."

"'Cept in the haid. His'n is all swelled up."

## *Bigger and Blacker*

"He's a good actor; awful funny."

"He's funny when he ain't actin', but he don't know it."

"An' he's got a reppitation."

"It's 'bout the on'y thing he's got I di'n't give him."

They moved on in silence for half a block. When the director spoke again it was obvious that he had his mind on business.

"You said you was broke, Florian."

"When I said that, cullud boy, I hadn't even half stahted to talk. I hate even to reflect about it. I ain't got nothin' an' I owes twice as much. All that money what I lost to-night was goin' to pay my debts. F'r all I know, Sis Callie Flukers is gwine th'ow me out of her boa'din' house t'morrow an' forgit to th'ow my trunk after me. I ain't even got a dime to eat with, an' Welford Potts hol's my I O U fo' twenty-five dollars. I guess they ain't nothin' I can do 'bout it."

"Want a job?"

"Says which?"

"Does you crave a job?"

"Does Polly crave a cracker?"

"It's hahd wuk."

"I ain't ashamed to wuk to keep fum sta'-vin'."

"An' dang'ous."

## *Double Double*

"Not near so dang'ous as owin' a board bill to Sis Callie."

"Mos' men woul'n't do it."

"I ain't mos' men. On'y"—and Florian hesitated—"I needs cash money right now; to-night."

"How much?"

"Twenty-five anyway."

"Come in heah." They turned in at Bud Peaglar's Barbecue Lunch Room and Billiard Parlor, seated themselves at Bud's desk, and for five minutes J. Cæsar Clump wrote rapidly. From his pocketbook he then extracted two ten-dollar bills and a five.

"Sign one an' you gits t'other, Florian."

"What this heah writin' says?"

"It binds you absolute an' positivel to wuk with The Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., for th'ee days, an' to do whatever I says you must do no matter how dang'ous. I pays you twenty-five dollars cash advance an' another twenty-five dollars th'ee days fum now."

"Gimme that pen."

"Remember you cain't refuse nothin' once you has signed that paper."

"Mistuh Clump—fo' fifty dollars I'd drive a automobile offen the top of Red Mountain."

The director smiled. "I suttinly is relieved



## *Bigger and Blacker*

to heah them words, Brother Slappey. Sign right yonder."

Florian signed, pocketed the twenty-five dollars and departed blithesomely for home. He didn't know what irksome task he might be called upon to perform—and didn't particularly care. After all, that was to-morrow, and the morrow had a way of taking care of itself.

Ten hours later Florian Slappey presented himself at an abandoned warehouse which had been converted into a studio. Over the doorway hung a golden sign:

The Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc.

Comedy and Fun

Orifice R. Latimer, Prest.

Mr. Slappey swaggered in and inquired for J. Cæsar Clump. Word was sent to Cæsar and Florian was bidden to enter.

This was not the first time that Florian had trod the sacred precincts of the Midnight, but now there was a proprietary swagger to his stride and a friendly smile upon his lips.

This time he came, not as a sightseer but as an integral part of the organization; a person employed at a goodly salary to do something. He belonged—and he strolled interestedly toward a set where a huge battery of lights blazed mercilessly upon the discomfitures of a



portly personage, Opus Randall by name, who, in the garb of a fireman, was in the process of having his face slapped by a shapely and attractive young colored lady.

Florian drew closer, and suddenly there came to his ears a biting voice: "Here, my man; you are intruding."

"Says which?"

"You are intruding. Git offen that set."

Florian turned, a slow flush mantling his colorado-claro complexion. He gazed into the stern eyes of Welford Potts.

Mr. Potts was strictly in focus. Gone were the peacock clothes of the previous night, and in their stead were the habiliments of slapstick comedy, but Welford wore the garments regally. His eyebrows were arched superciliously, as befitting a monarch inspecting an impertinent slave. Mr. Slappey, more impressed than he cared to admit, placed hands on hips and stared.

"Well, hush my mouf! If it ain't li'l' Welford hisse'f in pusson. Who you is talkin' to, Han'some?"

"I'm talkin' to you, feller. You is obstructin' the pitcher."

"Talk what you utters! Now if'n you craves to git me off'n this heah place——"

## *Bigger and Blacker*

Welford Potts beckoned to a huge and muscular gentleman in the overalls of an artisan.

"Simeon, pitch this feller out if'n he don't do like I says."

Florian surveyed Simeon's muscularity and retreated. Onlookers snickered audibly and Mr. Slappey writhed with fury.

"If you'll just step outside with me, Welford Potts, I'll——"

Mr. Potts lighted a cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke reflectively in Florian's direction. "I always did hate to converse with trash," he murmured.

"Cut!" The voice of J. Cæsar Clump came from the set, Opus Randall withdrew his face from the vicinity of the fair lady's slaps, and the director hurried to the scene of impending hostilities.

"What the matter is, Florian?"

"That knock-kneed, slab-sided, skinny-legged, no'count wuthless, half-baked piece of bacon rind come over an' tol' me to git offen the set an'——"

"He was right, Brother Slappey. You was th'eatenin' to git in range of the cam'ra, an'——"

"Yeh, an' does I git in range of him one time—just once, Cæsar—tha's all; he's gwine be in the prox'mity of a heap of sof' music which he

## *Double Double*

ain't gwine hear an' a bunch of sweet-smellin' flowers which ain't gwine tickle his nose. What I thinks of him——"

"This ain't no place fo' fightin'. An' anyway, I ain't gwine need you befo' t'morrow night."

"Not to-day a-tall?"

"Nope."

"What does I do t'morrow?"

J. Cæsar Clump was evasive. "Whatever I says. You done signed a writin' an' took an advance."

"I know that, an' I ain't kickin'. But what does I do?"

"S'mother time I tells you."

"Tell me now."

Mr. Clump seated himself on a soap box, and Florian dropped beside him. "It's thisaway, Florian—us is makin' the funniest pitcher the Midnight has ever turned out. It's all about how a fireman, which is bein' played by Opus Randall, is rivals fo' a gal with a tailor, which is bein' played by Welford Potts."

"Pff! Potts!"

"Now the big scene in the pitcher comes when Welford, which is the hero, has went to call on his gal. He's inside the house an' she ain't home, so he sits down to wait fo' her an'

## *Bigger and Blacker*

drops off to sleep. An' pretty soon the house catches on fire."

Florian's eye lighted. "I hope he gits burned up."

"Tha's the joke," explained Mr. Clump. "He gits wuss than that."

"Ise rootin' fo' that pitcher, Cæsar."

"What happens is this: They turns in the alarm, an' the fire depahtment comes along to save the house. Opus Randall, the fireman, is handlin' the hose, an' he turns it on the burnin' house. Then all of a sudden Welford Potts wakes up an' figures he is about to get extincted——"

"He ain't got brains enough to reelize that right away."

"It's in the scenario that he does. Well, he comes bustin' out of the house. Opus sees him an' turns the hose on him an' knocks him back into the fire."

"Hot dam!"

"So Welford burns a li'l' mo' an' comes out again, an' Opus busts him back in with that fire hose. Out he comes an' in he goes; he c'n either git burned to death or drowned."

"Sweet pitcher what you manufactures!"

"It's wow comedy; shuah-hit stuff. Is you ever heard anythin' funnier?"

"Not never."

## *Double Double*

"Well, tha's the big scene, an' I is crazy about it."

"Me too. If I had of wrote that story my ownse'f I coul'n't of thought of nothin' else. Golly, in this weather I bet that water is gwine be cold, too."

"Uh-huh. Freezin'."

"Tha's great! Say, Mistuh Clump, kin I watch 'em take that scene?"

"Well, yes." Mr. Clump seemed a trifle embarrassed. "I was kind of figgerin' on that. You see, Welford Potts is sort of weak an' delicate, an' we was aimin' to have some one double fo' him in that fire-an'-water scene."

"He ain't gwine do it hisse'f?"

"No. We gits somebody to do it fo' him. We's gwine shoot it at night, an' there ain't no close-ups until after he gits half burned an' t'other half drowned."

Mr. Slappey was vastly disappointed. "What durn fool is you aimin' to git to do that dirty work for Welford Potts?"

Mr. Clump saw that there was no sense in longer evading the issue. He met Florian's eyes squarely.

"You!"

"Huh?"

"You!"

Florian's jaw drooped; his head moved

## *Bigger and Blacker*

slowly from side to side. "Words you says, Mistuh Clump, but they don't mean nothin'. Where at does you git the fool idea that I is gwine do this thing fo' Welford Potts?"

The issue was squarely joined. "You is his size, Florian, an' you looks enough alike to double fo' him, an'——"

"I ain't gwine do it. Tha's all."

"Yes, you is."

"Guess again. You is a rotten prophet."

J. Cæsar Clump frowned. "I has got yo' written contrac'."

The bottom dropped from under Mr. Slap-  
pey. He recalled the document of the previous night. "'Tain't fair!" he wailed. "Doin' that stunt is bad enough, an' gittin' burned is wuss, an' becomin' drowned is wuss yet; but doin' it to save Welford Potts—I refuse!"

"Don't be silly, Florian."

"Never was mo' sensibler in my life."

The director rose. "Ve'y well," he snapped. "We'll see 'bout that."

"You is seein' now all you is goin' to."

"I ain't. If you refuse you have accepted money under false pretensions. Also we have yo' signed contrac'. Ise gwine turn this over to our attorneys fo' immedjit action."

Florian gloomed away. He was woeful of spirit and sick at heart. And that evening he

received a call from Lawyer Evans Chew, leading legal light of Birmingham's Darktown. Lawyer Chew talked lengthily, floridly and warningly. Florian was in for it; consequences dire and immediate would follow his refusal to go through with the agreement.

The argument between Florian and Lawyer Chew was acrimonious. Lawyer Chew was Florian's friend and Mr. Slappey knew it, and so eventually Florian nodded affirmation, although he was an ill young gentleman.

"I guess I got to, Lawyer Chew. But gosh knows I would ruther be daid."

"You has yo' choice, Florian."

"I has a hunch I never should of went in the motion-pitcher business."

"But you is in it, brother. Now I goes back an' tells Cæsar Clump that you is agreeable."

"Don't tell him nothin' of the sort. Tell him Ise plumb disagreeable, but also you c'n add that I is goin' th'oo with my contrac'."

Lawyer Chew departed and Florian flung himself across the bed, where he gave himself over to a night of abject misery. This was indeed piling an Ossa of humiliation upon a Pelion of suffering. He despised Welford Potts, and Welford had further abased him that day at the studio; what, then, would be his position when spectators assembled to see



## *Bigger and Blacker*

Florian perform the noxious task which rightfully belonged to the insufferable movie star? Welford would be there, of course, grinning superciliously at the discomfited Florian—perhaps giving directions which would tend to make his agony more acute.

The prospect was far from alluring, but there was no way out. Florian visioned himself stripped of his pervasive dignity, a laughing-stock now and forevermore, and a fierce hatred welled up in his heart against the author of his miseries.

Sleep came to him; and the next day dawned drear and disconsolate. The skies were leaden and overcast with low-hanging, swiftly scudding clouds which charged the atmosphere with chill foreboding. Florian shivered as he dressed, and even hot coffee and fried eggs at Bud Peaglar's place failed to revive his flagging spirits. Two or three of his friends hailed him grinningly; it was obvious that news of his ridiculous plight had spread over Birmingham.

Florian struggled to reconcile himself to the inevitable, but the task was indeed difficult. During the long day he was bombarded by a battery of grins, and in the early afternoon he learned that the thoughtful Mr. Potts had been inviting all and sundry to attend the festivities that night. Not only that, but Welford had



also seen to it that the story of the poker session was bruited about; and finally Florian crawled into a hole and pulled the hole in after him. This was shame and degradation beyond bearing, and only fear of the law kept him from declaring a labor moratorium for the night.

The shooting of the scene was to occur between eight and nine o'clock. During the afternoon Florian spent a miserable two hours on location with J. Cæsar Clump.

The Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., had purchased for the roasting process an abandoned and dilapidated cottage near Tittisville, just two blocks removed from Avenue F. This had been scientifically prepared for the spectacle. The house contained two doors, one front and one back, and four windows. Near the front door and beneath the two front windows smoke bombs and fire flares had been planted. According to Clump's directions, Florian was to enter the house at the zero hour, and once inside was personally to ignite the bombs and flares. That would give the house the appearance of a minor-league holocaust.

When the smoke attained its smokiest and the flames their hottest, Florian was to make his first sortie into the face of the fire hose which Opus Randall would be wielding.

## *Bigger and Blacker*

"An' when the hose hits me?" inquired Mr. Slappey.

"You won't need no mo' directions after that," responded Cæsar cheerfully. "The hose'll show you what to do."

At seven o'clock Florian put his earthly affairs in order and started for the lot. His heart was heavy within his bosom and he railed against the unkind fate which was thus ruthlessly robbing him of his final scintilla of dignity.

But even more overpowering than his dislike for the immediate future was his hatred of Welford Potts, the diminutive author of his manifold miseries.

Florian loathed Welford Potts as he had never believed it possible for one human being to despise another. It was not that Welford had trimmed him at poker, nor that he was doubling for that insufferable person in this ridiculous motion picture, but rather that Mr. Potts was personally distasteful to Florian. Mr. Slappey ambioned to do murder with Welford in the rôle of murderee, and when he swung in from Avenue F and came within sight of the evening's crematory, that feeling became even more pronounced.

It seemed to Florian that he had been destined to furnish a colored Roman holiday.

## *Double Double*

All Birmingham was there to view the festivities. Worse than all, some enterprising gentleman had erected a hot-dog and soft-drink stand and was doing a land-office business among the hundreds who were braving the decided chill in search of thrills and novelty.

Florian hesitated; then, because he was a philosopher and trained to make the best of bad bargains, he clicked his teeth, threw back his narrow shoulders and strutted crowdward with such insouciance as he could muster from his sadly depleted store.

His arrival was hailed with considerable ribaldry.

"Hey, Florian! When did you git to become a movin'-pitcher actor?"

"Is you got on asbestos pants, Brother Slappey?"

"Somebody tol' me you was gwine play the part of a brand gittin' snatched fum the burnin'."

"Got any fire insurance, Florian?"

Florian waved with simulated cheeriness toward the crowd, but the smile which he plastered on his features was sickly in the extreme.

Darkness was settling; officials of the company were busy with last-minute arrangements having to do chiefly with the fire hose. J. Cæsar Clump and Opus Randall hovered over

## *Bigger and Blacker*

that wriggly engine of torture and discussed water power. Then they tried it out, and Florian quailed as the terrific stream sizzled from the nozzle and roared against the side of a big oak tree.

"Uh-huh," he agreed with himself. "I guess Cæsar Clump was right. That hose suttinly is gwine give me a clew about what I does after I runs out of the house."

Florian strolled toward the fire hose. His eyes were wide with the fascination which brings a bird into close contact with the consuming jaws of a hungry snake. And then on the edge of the crowd he glimpsed the nobly raimented figure of his *bête noire*, Welford Potts, and heard Welford's nasal drawl.

"An' you be careful not to miss him, Opus. This is gwine be one noble evenin'."

Florian turned away. Welford Potts was the one person in the world with whom he had no desire to hold converse at that particular moment. He started toward the doomed house, but he was not quick enough. Through the fast-setting darkness Welford espied him, and Welford gave chase.

"Hey, you!"

Florian quickened his pace, and, without looking around, knew that he was pursued. He made straight for the cabin. There, at

least, his humiliation by Welford Potts could be concealed from the naked eye of the public.

Inside the house he paused. All was dark and gloomy. Mr. Potts stepped inside the door so that the two men were concealed from the curious stares of the crowd.

"What you want?" grated Mr. Slappey.

"I aims to make talk with you."

"Yo' aim is rotten. I ain't got no time——"

"Now listen at me, feller." Welford reached into his coat pocket and produced a scrap of paper. "Does you recall what this is?"

Florian squinted through the gloom. "My I O U fo' twenty-five dollars."

"Ezac'ly. I craves my money."

"Tha's one cravin' which ain't gwine git satisfied."

Welford's lips curled into a sneer. "You says words, but they don't mean nothin'. I thought you was gwine try somethin' like that, so I has come to inform you what I has done."

"I ain't intrusted in yo' doin's, unless you plans to lead a funeral."

"Cæsar Clump tol' me you had got paid twenty-five dollars advance fo' to-night's work, an' that another twenty-five is to be paid you immedjitly after the job is done. Ain't that correc'?"

"I ain't sayin' it ain't."

## *Bigger and Blacker*

"I know it is. All right; me an' my lawyer is gwine be waitin' outside, an' when the treasury goes to pay you that twenty-five dollars, us attaches it."

"You whiches?"

"Us attaches it. So you don't git nothin' to-night but the honor of doublin' fo' the best cullud movin'-pitcher actor in the world."

Florian stared, appalled. Then slowly the awful fury which had been tumescing within his breast for the past forty-eight hours came to a head. His lips opened, but words would not come—merely a hodge-podge of gasping sounds.

"An' so," finished Welford Potts, "you not on'y don't git nothin' fo' bein' fired an' watered, but you gits twenty-five dollars less than that."

Mr. Florian Slappey felt a sudden and irresistible urge for action. A great electric current shot through his veins and caused the muscles of his puny arms to become as of tempered steel. Flame flashed from his eyes, and for the moment he saw nothing but the leering vapid face of his tormentor.

Then the face disappeared and only the pain in Mr. Slappey's knuckles told him that he had struck. The assault had been reflex—and terrible. Florian gazed down at the elegant prostrate figure and for the first time in his life

## *Double Double*

experienced the glorious thrill which comes to a knocker-out.

The body of the fallen star twitched and a groan broke from his lips. Florian glanced apprehensively through the window. The crowd was huge and restless. J. Cæsar Clump was looking about, evidently in search of Florian.

An idea hit Florian in the brain. As he had struck without forethought, so now he acted on instinct. In a corner he found a piece of rope; the task of binding and gagging Welford Potts took but a minute, but during that minute Florian's idea crystallized and a slow grin decorated the Slappey countenance. At length the task was finished, and by dint of enormous effort Florian hoisted the inert form into a chair.

Consciousness returned to Welford Potts, but action and speech were denied him. Not so Florian. That gentleman stood over the figure of his victim and gloated.

"Doublin' fo' you, is I? Well, I reckon I ain't. The feller which is doublin' fo' you to-night is Mistuh Welford Potts. Git me? You is a actor an' a artist; artists don't leave nobody else do their actin' fo' them, an' Ise gwine do you the favor of makin' you a ginuwine artist. Tha's what kind of a friend I is. Uh-



## *Bigger and Blacker*

huh—you owes me a heap, Mistuh Potts; a whole big heap. Things is gwine happen aroun' heah pretty sudden an' they is gwine happen to you; an' folks ain't goin' to reckernize you either on account they's gwine be a heap of smoke an' mo' fire than they counted on. Just watch me."

Mr. Slappey walked to the back of the house. The two windows there were equipped with heavy wooden shutters and the task of making them fast took but a moment. In the back door Florian found a rusty key. He tested this in the lock and found that it worked. Then he left the door unlocked and put the key in his pocket.

He discovered some abandoned newspapers, and these he placed carefully along the back wall. Welford Potts watched these operations with eyes which were distended with horror. Florian whistled as he worked and grinned cheerily at his enemy.

"Things is comin' yo' way, Mistuh Potts; b'lieve me, yassuh they is! I maybe ain't much poker player but Ise hell on fires."

From outside came the stentorian voice of J. Cæsar Clump.

"Florian Slappey—where is you at?"

"Comin', answered Florian. And then, smiling and strutting, he emerged from the cabin and



moved forward toward the directorial group.

And now there was no mistaking the jauntiness of his manner. He walked regally, and a gasp went over the crowd, for it was plain that Mr. Slappey was not feigning his enjoyment.

"Is you ready, Mistuh Clump? I craves to begin actin'."

"All ready, Florian. Say—you look awful happy."

"I is, Cæsar. All my life I has wanted to be a movie actor, an' I reckon this is 'bout as good a way to start as any."

"Right you is, Florian. A good sport is the mostest thing you is." He turned toward cameraman and Opus Randall. "You-all ready?"

"We is."

"All right, Florian. You go into the house an' light them bombs an' flares. Ise gwine watch fum out heah an' when the smoke an' fire gits to goin' strong I'll yell at you to come runnin' out. Remember in this pitcher you is cravin' to git at yo' gal, which Opus Randall is keepin' you fum, an' you ain't s'posed to fall until the water knocks you down."

"I remember." Florian turned to Opus. "Be sure you squish me right in the face with that water, Mistuh Randall. Le's make this scene funny."

## *Bigger and Blacker*

Opus grinned. "Don't you worry, Florian. You is gwine git bathed all over."

"Good." Florian waved toward the crowd, turned, and swung jauntily into the house. He smiled beatifically at the imprisoned Welford Potts. "I hopes fo' yo' sake that you is half fireproof an' half fish, Mistuh Potts." Welford gurgled through his gag.

Humming lightly, Florian produced a box of matches. He first lighted the flares and then the smoke bombs. Then he stood back and waited. At length dense clouds of black smoke rolled through the windows, giving the eerie effect of a tremendous fire. From beyond the window came the voice of the director.

"Ready! Cam'ra! Shoot!"

Florian did not hurry. Waiting until the flares were at their brightest and the smoke at its heaviest, he moved to the back of the cabin. And then, with sober deliberateness, he applied a match to the newspapers. For perhaps ten seconds he watched. The tinderdry boards of the cabin caught at the flames. The tongues of fire licked greedily upward; the heat in the cabin was intense. And now there was a genuine fire in addition to the perfectly safe flares. Florian then opened the back door, inserted the key on the outside and produced a pocket-knife. Then he gently laid Welford Potts face

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down on the floor. With three strokes of the shining blade he cut the bonds which held gag and arms and legs. That done, he leaped for the back door, slammed it behind him and turned the key in the lock.

Welford Potts, motion-picture star, was securely locked in a cabin which was actually burning, and the single mode of egress was through the front door, where Opus Randall stood waiting with his hose.

Florian leaped from the back door into a fringe of trees. He circled swiftly to the front of the cabin and took his place unobtrusively beyond the edge of the crowd where he might miss no detail of the drama.

It was well worth viewing. Even as Mr. Slappey watched, he saw the front door fly open and a dim smoke-shrouded figure emerge. And right there was where Opus Randall proved that his aim was perfect. The monster stream spurted from the nozzle of his hose and struck Welford Potts full in the midriff. Instantly Florian understood why Cæsar Clump had not worried about what Florian would do when the water hit him.

For a split second Welford braced himself against the stream. And then he was picked up bodily and hurled back into the house. The spectators shrieked with laughter and J. Cæsar

## *Bigger and Blacker*

Clump leaped up and down with enthusiasm. He prophesied in a loud excited tone that this was going to be the funniest scene in all the history of filmdom. Florian agreed with him.

Through the terrific smoke Mr. Slappeg saw Mr. Potts struggle to his feet and crouch for another sally. He saw Welford leap wildly through the door, and once again be hurled back by the vindictive fire hose. And then he saw something else.

Welford jumped to the back of the cottage; his efforts to open door or windows were fruitless. Instantly he ripped off his coat and attacked the genuine flames. He worked with fierce desperation, while Florian silently encouraged him from outside. But finally his fingers were scorched and he dropped the coat into the fire and once again dashed out through the smoke which screened the front of the cottage.

Once more he was hurled back, but this time he did not bother to rise. He crawled forward desperately on hands and knees. Opus didn't miss him by so much as an inch. The powerful stream flattened the unfortunate picture actor, and for a few seconds he lay there, drenched and writhing. The crowd howled encouragement.

## *Double Double*

"C'mon, Florian! Come on out! Water never hurt nobody!"

"Swim, Florian! Le's see you swim!"

"How you like actin', Brother Slappey?"

Welford made the mistake of rising. Water, smoke and flame had rendered him unrecognizable. Opus Randall caught him on the shoulder with the hose, spun him around and sent him whirling into the burning house. Another wild leap for safety met with even more disastrous results. The crowd was cheering loudly, and it was then that Florian Slappey moved magniloquently forward to the group about the camera. He touched J. Cæsar Clump on the shoulder and murmured gentle advice into his ear.

"Mistuh Clump—I wouldn't kill my best actor, was I you."

Cæsar turned. His jaw dropped. "Florian Slappey!" he gasped.

Florian bowed. "Hisse'f—in person."

"B-b-but—yonder—who is that?"

"That," explained Florian suavely, "is Mistuah Welford Potts!"

"Cut!" The voice of the director rose shrill above the clamor. "Leave off that squirtin', Opus!"

"The house," explained Florian quietly, "is really on fire."

## *Bigger and Blacker*

Welford Potts lurched from the house. Instantly a rescue party started forward, but it was Florian Slappey who first reached the much-battered movie actor.

Mr. Potts was more or less of a sight. Physically he was uninjured, but spiritually he was considerably dampened. They dragged him to safety while the cottage burned merrily, and it was there that he sat up and permitted his eyes to fall upon the triumphant Florian Slappey.

"Him," he gasped, pointing a trembling finger. "He done it. Busted me in the jaw an' then set the house on fire, an'——"

J. Cæsar Clump whirled on Mr. Slappey. "Is that true, Florian?"

"Mos'ly."

"We'll put you in jail fo' this."

"Go to it. Jails don't burn."

"But I don't understand——"

"Listen heah, Mistuh Clump—ain't you got a wonderful pitcher? Ain't it the swellest pitcher that was ever made?"

J. Cæsar Clump nodded. His directorial pride was mounting. "There never was nothin' funnier, an' tha's a fac'."

"Well, who done it?" inquired Florian.

"You. But——"

"Ain't no buts. I done you a favor which

makes the best pitcher you ever took, an'——"

"But you ain't earned that other twenty-five dollars."

"Shuh! Twenty-five dollars don't bother me. What Ise astin' you is this: Me havin' done you this favor, Ise countin' on you to see that Welford Potts don't have me arrested."

Mr. Clump deliberated. After all, this picture was to prove his making as a director, and besides, he liked Florian and despised Welford Potts. His hand came out.

"I promises. Shake."

Florian shook.

"And now," advised Mr. Clump, "you better git out of Welford's sight while he's so hot."

Florian moved away. "Hot is right," he murmured happily.

On the outskirts of the crowd he discovered Lawyer Evans Chew. He linked his arm in that of the great colored attorney and together they moved off. Into Chew's ear Florian poured the story of his triumph. Lawyer Chew roared with laughter.

"Well, dawg-gone yo' time, Florian—if you ain't the beatinest man! I suttinly has got to hand it to you. You shuah is even with that uppity actor, an' on'y fo' one thing I'd say it was a puffec' revenge."

"What's that, Lawyer Chew?"



## *Bigger and Blacker*

"You di'n't git the other twenty-five dollars the company promised you."

Florian chuckled. "Yes, I did."

"You did?"

"Uh-huh."

"How come?"

"This-away," explained Florian Slappey confidentially. "When 'Welford Potts was trapped in that house he took off his coat an' tried to beat out the real fire with it. He didn't hurt the fire none, but he burned up his coat complete an' absolute."

"Yeh, I understan' that. But I don't see——"

"Maybe you'll see better," explained Florian gravely, "when I explains to you that in the pocket of that coat was my I O U fo' twenty-five dollars!"



### *III. The Bathing Booty*

The air of the dining room was surcharged with acrimony. The long gangling figure of Mr. Enoch Tapp was doubled at the waist and he punctuated his ultimatum with blows of a skinny fist upon the table top.

"An' tha's all there is to it, Evergreen. I ain't gwine stand it no longer."

Mrs. Evergreen Tapp matched the anger of her husband.

"Words what you says!"

"I says words an' they mean somethin'. Fum now on you ain't goin' to act in movin' pitchers no mo'."

"Pff! I reckon I got somethin' to say about that."

"I ain't studyin' what you says. It's what you does that I is intrusted in."

She rose and stood belligerently before him; a rather small and decidedly shapely woman whose creamy-brown complexion was suffused with the tint of cold fury.

"Nerve, Mistuh Tapp, is the one thing you ain't got nothin' else but. Who you reckon you is, tellin' me what I kin an' cain't do?"

## *Bigger and Blacker*

"Ise yo' husban', ain't I?"

"Wuss luck. But you don't own me."

"I pays taxes on you."

"Well, I pays my own taxes heahafter. When a gal like I gits a chance to git to be an actress——"

"Actress!" He laughed scornfully. "I reckon you thinks it's actressin' to put on a bathin' suit an' let a cam'ra take yo' pitcher. Nex' thing you is gwine be talkin' 'bout art. Well, you give me ear, woman! I ain't gwine premit no wife of mine to be no bathin' beauty, an' tha's all I has got to say."

"You better say somethin' else, Mistuh Enoch Tapp, 'cause what you has just pronounced has went out of t'other ear fum which it came in."

"You refuses to quit yo' job with the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc.?"

"I does. I woul'n't do it nohow, but it specially woul'n't be fair now, even did I want to. They has done shot about six scenes which I is in an' the whole pitcher would be ruint did I git out."

"Fumadiddles! You talks like you was some impawtant."

"I is!" she flashed. "Oh, I ain't sayin' that they chosed me any more enthusiastic than they took them other gals; but since they

## *The Bathing Booty*

stahted makin' the pitcher they has let me do some bits with Opus Randall."

"That big, fat, no-'count ol' buzzard?"

"Yeh, him. An' he's the funniest cullud movin'-pitcher actor in the world. An' he tol' me with his own mouf that this new pitcher—The Old Mill Scream—is gwine be the laughin'est two-reeler which the Midnight has put out sence it was fust disorganized."

"Well, you ain't gwine furnish none of the fun, 'cause, Evergreen, you has ceased bein' an actress. Fum now on you has resigned away fum the job of runnin' around in a brown bathin' suit."

"I ain't!"

"You refuses?"

"I does."

"Then I goes down an' resigns fo' you."

"I tells J. Cæsar Clump he ain't to assept yo' resignation."

Enoch Tapp grimaced with distaste.

"That li'l' shrimp of a director! I reckon I kin convince him that I has got a right——"

"You ain't got nothin' but breeze an' you is wastin' it talkin'. Maybe I is yo' wife—I reckon all wimmin make mistakes sometimes—but you ain't gwine stan' up there an' tell me is I is or is I ain't to act in motion pitchers.

## *Bigger and Blacker*

Mos' men would be proud of their wife's actin'."

"You knowed I was gwine be ag'in it."

"How come you to think that?"

"'Cause you di'n't tell me when you fust stahted. You went an' kep' it a secret fum me until you had been wukkin' a week. Ain't that proof that you knowed I woul'n't like it?"

"Maybe 'tis an' maybe 'taint. But that ain't neither hither or yon, 'cause all what counts is that I continues with the comp'ny."

"I fo'bids you."

"I ain't gwine do what you says. What right you got deprivin' me——"

"There ain't no depravity about it. I says my wife shoul'n't be no bathin' beauty an' she ain't gwine be such."

"An' that's all what you says?"

"Ev'vy las' word."

"Well, Mistuh Tapp, you ain't said it strong enough, 'cause I goes right ahead an' finishes actin' in The Old Mill Scream. Now what is you gwine do 'bout it?"

The issue was squarely joined. Across the dining table husband and wife stared at each other and knew that they faced a marital crisis. Neither gave the slightest indication of weakening and Enoch experienced a qualm of apprehension. They had not been married very

## *The Bathing Booty*

long and were still excessively fond of each other. Enoch wasn't quite sure just how much stubbornness might be contained in the little body of his wife.

"You wait an' see what I does."

"Ise waitin'."

"Well, you won't have to wait so long."

He grabbed his hat from the hall tree and slammed the front door on his way out. For a few minutes Evergreen stared at the somber panels, then her lips quivered. But she did not give way. Before the tears broke loose a new idea came to her and her mouth set in a firm straight line betokening grim determination. Mrs. Tapp had certain immutable ideas on the question of wifely rights and she knew that this was not the time or place to weaken. But somehow she wasn't so happy as she had been.

As a matter of fact, she had known that her husband would register objection to this brief professional career and for that reason had refrained from consulting him when opportunity presented itself. After all, she really wanted to act. Ever since the launching of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., in Birmingham, colored society had been on the *qui vive*. The organization's output had already won place on the programs of more than one hun-

dred first-class first-run houses throughout the country.

Every so often came a picture requiring the services of local amateur talent to augment the laugh-provoking efforts of the resident company. Such a picture was *The Old Mill Scream*, then in the process of manufacture. And in this picture neither effort nor expense was being spared, since it had been authored by Orifice R. Latimer, colored president of the Midnight, and Orifice was determined that his brain child should come into the world in proper fashion.

The comedy was really not a bad one. It was a burlesque—partly conscious and partly unconscious—of the old mill-wheel melodrama. There was the funny man—Opus Randall, the portly—who bought the mill and hired a crew to run it; and then the discovery that all the young men he had hired to work for him were pulchritudinous ladies who cavorted around in one-piece bathing suits. Then the advent of Opus' film wife with her flashing green eyes; and the big scene of the film was to come when Opus had discharged his corps of fair assistants in order to placate his wife—and was dreaming of their departed charms.

In his dream he was to vision the old mill wheel and fastened to each paddle would be

one of the fair damsels. The wheel was then to revolve slowly until all of them were drowned, at which melancholy moment he was to make the ghastly discovery that this had all been the work of his jealous wife.

Of course, trick photography and many close-ups were to be employed in the filming of this agonizingly funny scene. An abandoned mill on the Warrior had been rented for the filming and expert mechanics had repaired some of the machinery so that when water was let into the mill race the big wheel would turn. Two days later the company was due to visit the Warrior for the shooting of the final scenes, and Evergreen Tapp was quite determined that she would be among those present.

But when that night her husband maintained a pervasive and dignified silence, and refused to respond to her very obvious peace advances, she became a trifle worried. The following day she suggested to J. Cæsar Clump, the small but dynamic director, that she resign. He threw his skinny arms high in the air and told her that such a procedure was impossible.

"It cain't be done, Mis' Tapp. Ain't we picked you out fo' some special bits with Opus Randall, an' haven't we filmed them scenes in the interior sets, an' ain't them sets a'ready



## *Bigger and Blacker*

been tore down? Was you to quit now, us would have to start right at the beginnin' again an' do the whole pitcher over. It'd cost more than we'd sell it for. No'm; you signed a contrac' an' we has got to hold you to it."

Mention of her contract sobered Evergreen. She was afraid of a writin', and there was no forgetting the fact that she had duly affixed her signature to a formal document of personal service. Wherefore, in fear and trembling, she made ready for the trip to the Warrior with the company. The night prior to her departure she broke the news to her husband.

"I ain't gwine be home to-morrow night, Enoch."

"Hmph!"

"Ise got to go down to the Warrior in the mawnin' with my comp'ny. Us is gwine to shoot some scenes."

"If I was down there I'd shoot some actors, too."

"I—Ise gwine resign fum the comp'ny when this pitcher is finished."

"I ain't intrusted in yo' resignations."

And so the following morning she departed. At the studio the company boarded two busses for the long ride to the Warrior. It was a royal and festive occasion and they rolled out of Birmingham to the accompaniment of much



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singing and jollity. But Evergreen did not join in the merrymaking. Her heart was heavy within her breast and she began to realize that perhaps she had been too precipitate in thus plunging into a professional career. However——

Back in Birmingham, Enoch Tapp gloomed about his duties as community gardener. Enoch was a good gardener and his services were much in demand by householders of the Mountain Terrace district.

Enoch couldn't understand his wife. He didn't see why she had insisted upon a theatrical diversion. He was ag'in acting; it didn't seem just right, and the fact that his wife was a bathing beauty did not add to his enthusiasm. There really was no reason why she should have undertaken this thing. He earned an average of twenty dollars a week as a free-lance gardener, which amount permitted him to cater amply to Evergreen's needs. And now—— He visioned her on the bank of the Warrior in that obnoxious bathing suit, consorting with theatrical folk; Enoch was bewildered. He didn't know just what to do and he was doing it miserably.

The house on Avenue F seemed strangely empty that night. He sat in the living room and tried to read, but the words blurred before

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him and so he donned hat and coat and strolled downtown on Eighteenth Street and turned in at Bud Peaglar's Barbecue Lunch Room and Billiard Parlor, where a hectic Kelly pool game was in progress. He unracked a cue, paid a quarter, accepted a pellet and joined in. But he played languidly and unluckily and eventually quit. Florian Slappey, Darktown's diminutive fashion plate, joined him.

"Ain't seen you shootin' pool since you was fust ma'ied, Enoch."

"Ain't shot none until to-night."

"You suttinly is out of practice."

"Reckon it'll come back to me."

"Melancholy what you has got."

"Reckon I c'n be sad if I wants."

"Guess so. How come Evergreen let you git out?"

"She don't know nothin' about it, n'r neither she don't care. She's down to the Warrior with them Midnight pitcher-folks."

"Hot dam! I heard she was playin' in that new pitcher of theirs."

"Yeh, dawg-gone it! I ain't got no use fo' pitcher actin', an'——"

"'Tain't so bad," commented Florian sagely. "I was in their last one."

"You ain't no woman."

"Tha's a fact."

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"An' you ain't a wife."

"Guess not."

"Specially mine."

"Glory be!"

"I is sad; absotively mis'able. What you reckon kind of pitcher they is takin' down there?"

Florian arched his eyebrows in surprise.

"Di'n't Evergreen tell you?"

"I an' her ain't been talkin' to each other fo' the las' two days."

"H'm!" Florian hesitated. "Seems like to me it's a terrible dang'ous pitcher, Enoch."

"Dang'ous?"

"Uh-huh."

"Wh-wh-what you mean—dang'ous?"

Florian had heard many rumors. He passed them along now with an earnestness which lent verisimilitude.

"Well, as I un'erstan's it, they has got eight bathin' beauties, an' they is fixin' to tie each one of 'em to the paddle of a mill wheel an' then start the wheel goin' round. Now you can 'magine fo' yo' ownse'f what happens to them gals when their paddle gits down under the water."

"Oh, Lawsy!"

"They claim it's gwine be awful funny, but some of the things folks laughs at ain't so

funny to the folks which provides the 'musement. Now when I was gwine act in a pitcher, what they wanted me to do was to git burned an' drowned an'——"

"Paddlin' my Evergreen!"

"Uh-huh. Roun' an' roun' an' roun'. An' the drownder she gits the funnier it is, an' you can figure how far they is gwine ca'y it, 'cause funny scenes is the fondest things they is of."

Enoch Tapp was rigid with horror. So this then was the diabolical scheme? He visioned his poor unsuspecting bride traveling cheerfully away from him to a paddle-wheel grave.

"Roun' an' roun' she goes—up, down, kersplash!" His feet banged on the floor. "It ain't to be stood!"

"Says which?"

"Ise gwine protest."

"Man, you got to have an awful loud protester fo' them folks to heah you."

Enoch was horribly excited. He stretched himself to full length and dug long fingers into Florian Slappey's shoulder.

"Is you my friend, Florian?"

"I ain't nothin' else."

"Comes you with me to the Warrior River?"

Mr. Slappey's eyes twinkled. He did not relish action, but he enjoyed being where action was.

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"How you aims to git there?"

"I rents me a flivver fum one of these heah drive-it-yo'-se'f companies fo' cullud."

Florian extended his hand.

"Us travels!"

And travel they did, but not without mishap. There was a flat tire for one thing, and both proved clumsy at tire-changing. Then the dry patch proved too dry and too little patch. The tube leaked and the ordeal had to be undergone again. It was a bitter, heart-rending night for the distraught husband. He conjured in his mind's eye all manner of dire things that must be happening to his wife, and the night crawled on as they struggled in the darkness by the roadside. Dawn came grayly and then day broke. When they came within sight of the Warrior River it was eight o'clock, and they found themselves a considerable distance from the mill site. Grimly, and with the demands of the inner man shrieking for satisfaction, they started for the scene.

Meanwhile the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., was strictly on the job. The company was routed out at seven in order that no single ray of the bright sun should be missed. Breakfast was cooked and eaten and then the company members dispersed to their tents to

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don the habiliments of slapstick. J. Cæsar Clump and his cameraman conferred.

"Have 'em ready to shoot by nine o'clock," counseled the cameraman. "It'll be enough light then."

"Plenty film?"

"Heaps. Box loaded an' a new load all ready."

"Great! I got a hunch this is our big day."

The deserted mill was, indeed, picturesque, nestling in a groove of oak, cypress and willow. Spanning the front was the fifteen-foot mill wheel, its paddles about three feet in width, affording ample lounging space for the bathing beauties. Beneath the wheel was an empty mill race and slightly above the mill was a tiny lake. Separating mill race and lake was a trap. In the old days when the mill had been useful as well as ornamental the release of the trap sent water rushing through the race and the wheel would turn slowly, thus operating the now-rusty machinery within.

J. Cæsar Clump strutted about, shouting orders. He was an imposing, if attenuated, figure in his white silk shirt, flowing necktie, horn-rimmed goggles and shiny puttees. His voice roared from the large end of a megaphone and his underlings obeyed implicitly and instantly.

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Assistants, a mechanic, minor members of the cast and the bathing beauties watched the preliminary work with interested eyes. They saw the first rehearsals and the first scenes of the comedy: Opus Randall—pompous off the set, but,ridiculously funny on—convulsed them with laughter as he plunged about, climbing over the machinery and pounding through a couple of screamingly funny scenes with his motion-picture wife. And then Clump ordered the bathing beauties forward. He explained to them the contemplated scene. He assured them that there was no danger whatsoever. He inspected the camera set-up, facing the mill wheel from the far side of the dry mill race. And then, with considerable difficulty and not a few hysterical giggles, he succeeded in placing eight bathing beauties on eight paddles. They clutched their supports fearfully, trying to conceal their fear, and he permitted them to recline in comfort for a few moments that satisfaction and not terror be registered when the shooting commenced.

“You-all ain’t s’posed to be skeered,” he told them loudly. “Fust place you ain’t where you is, on account you ain’t nothin’ but wimmin in a dream.”

“But if us falls——”

“You ain’t gwine fall. I got a swell me-



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chanic in yonder an' he turns the wheel real slow. The cam'ra ain't takin' nothin' but the upside an' the top, so when you pass the top the wheel stops, the cam'ra stops, an' you git off an' come around this way ready to climb back on yo' paddle ag'in. But the thing to do is look happy, on account you is s'posed all to be wampin' Opus Randall, which is dreamin' 'bout you."

The taking of the scene required infinite patience and more than a trifle of directoral ability. J. Cæsar Clump worked painstakingly and finally imbued them with his own artistic spirit so that when, eventually, Opus fell asleep and the camera and mill wheel started grinding, the octet of bathing beauties more than justified the expense entailed by the trip.

J. Cæsar Clump was frenzied with enthusiasm; he particularly praised one, Evergreen Tapp.

"You done noble, Mis' Tapp. Ise proud of you."

"I was skeered."

"Was skeered ain't is skeered. I reckon you is gwine make an awful hit in this pitcher. S'posin' you climb back on that wheel an' leave me git a close shot of you movin' around."

Evergreen was frightened, but willing. This



indeed, was a personal triumph. She took her place on the paddle and J. Cæsar Clump inspected the turf before the mill in search of a place to put the camera to best advantage.

“’Bout heah,” he ordered; but before the cameraman could move his instrument something happened.

The noise came from the rear of the mill. It came from the throat of a man; a long, gangling, angry man who came zigzagging through the woods, spurning the greensward with huge flat feet.

“Hey, Evergreen!” His voice reverberated through the bosky dell. “Is you alive an’ where is you at?”

Evergreen recognized the voice of her husband.

“Heah I is, sugarfoot!”

Enoch whirled at a right angle. He sped toward the camera, and J. Cæsar Clump waved him wildly away.

“Git out of the pitcher, tall boy! Git out of the pitcher!”

At that instant the mechanic inside the mill started revolving the wheel slowly by hand. The distended eyes of the frantic husband saw his cherished bride apparently fastened to the lethal wheel, and Enoch swung into action. He took the shortest and most direct route.

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With wild leaps and eerie howls of encouragement, he approached the mill from the side. J. Cæsar Clump sped to the side of the cameraman.

"Don't miss none of that," he ordered.

The cameraman nodded.

"Ise gettin' it all. Got a fresh load in. . . . Go to it, Mistuh Tapp!"

Enoch was certainly going to it. His elongated frame was clambering over the dilapidated mill like a great spider. Meanwhile Evergreen, having reached the terminus of her arc, slipped from the paddle as she had been instructed to do, but Enoch did not know this. He fancied now that his dearly beloved was immersed in the cool water, never bothering to inspect the mill race and so learn that it was bone-dry.

The spectators clustered excitedly about the camera. The wheel stopped. Enoch, mad with fury, clambered up the outside of the wheel and then something happened.

After all, the mill had seen its best days. For years it had been out of use and the plank-ing was inclined to be aged. There came a terrible shriek from Enoch's throat as the plank upon which he rested broke through. There was a splintering crash, a roar of fear, and the lengthy body of Mr. Tapp was precipi-

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tated into the wheel. He missed the axle by inches and banged against the rim of the mill wheel, where he lay in a momentary stupor.

Then it was that the directoral genius of Mr. J. Cæsar Clump came to the surface. With agility amazing in one so small, Mr. Clump sprang to the trap separating lake and mill race. With a single heave he raised the door and the pent-up water rushed into the dry ditch. It roared against the paddles, and quite slowly and inevitably the wheel commenced to revolve.

The cold water, the instability of his resting place and the all-powerful desire to rescue his wife combined to restore Enoch Tapp. The huge wheel turned slowly and Enoch saw himself approaching the madly roaring water. He staggered to his feet and walked ahead to avoid a ducking. To those outside who gazed at him through the spokes of the wheel he gave the impression of a tremendously lengthy mouse. Mr. Tapp's voice rose above the shriek of the mill race:

"Cut off that water! This wheel's turnin'!"

J. Cæsar Clump shouted directions.

"Keep walkin' uphill, Brother Tapp!"

"Don't do me no good. Uphill gits to be downhill too fast."

Enoch was caught. The instinct of self-

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preservation kept him going. Terrifiedly he trudged up the descending slope of his prison. His very action served to accelerate the wheel. In a few seconds he was running without ever gaining an inch of ground. Spokes on both sides blocked possible egress and all the while the camera was clicking busily.

"Leave me git out! Ise gwine be kilt!"

"Keep a-travelin', Mistuh Tapp!"

The spectators shouted encouraging advice.

"Tha's good exercise, brother!"

"Don't slow down, you'll git them foots wet!"

"Lemme see how high up you can run!"

It was, indeed, a funny scene—funny to everybody save Enoch Tapp.

Evergreen joined the crowd on the far side of the mill race. She flung a glance at her husband and suffered for him. Also she was afraid.

"Enoch!" she called. The man cast wild eyes upon her.

"Is you alive, Evergreen?"

"Positivel! Listen, Enoch, what you doin'?"

"Runnin'!"

"Why don't you git out?"

"I cain't. Faster I goes, faster also the wheel goes."

Evergreen couldn't comprehend. She

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watched the destinationless flight of her husband, saw his wild hurdle each time he was confronted by the gap where once had been the plank through which he had fallen. She didn't understand half what she knew about the thing, but she did know from the manner and actions of Enoch that he was frightened and in trouble.

"Hol' on, Enoch! Ise comin'!"

"Ain't—nothin'—to—hol'—on—to. Ise—plumb—tuckered—out."

Clad in her one-piece bathing suit, Mrs. Evergreen Tapp sprang to the rescue. Clump, seeing possibilities for additional drama, returned to the head of the mill race and shut off the water. The wheel stopped slowly, groaningly. As its speed diminished, Mr. Enoch Tapp wriggled through the spokes and dived headlong into the shallow mill race. His action proved entirely too precipitate; Mr. Tapp was inclined to be a deep-water diver.

Evergreen reached him first. She dragged his inert form halfway up the bank. The cameraman caught them in his field and continued cranking. J. Cæsar Clump spoke eagerly to Opus Randall and the massive movie star swung into the picture. He assisted Evergreen in dragging Enoch's form to the bank, and then Opus did a very queer thing. He waited until Enoch showed signs of becoming

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interested in the landscape and at that instant Opus Randall clasped the outraged Evergreen in his arms.

Enoch sat up and rubbed his eyes. His expression was a thoroughly comical admixture of disbelief and fury. Weakened as he was by the events of the past few moments, he scrambled to his feet and attacked Opus Randall. For perhaps a minute the struggle was excellent. And to the ears of Opus, attuned to orders from his director, came the voice of J. Cæsar Clump:

“Take a dive, Opus! Take a dive!”

Whereupon Opus permitted Enoch to heave him into the mill race. Instantly Enoch collapsed and his wife dropped beside him, pillow-ing his head on her lap. There were further stentorian orders from the director, and the woman who was playing the rôle of Opus’ jealous wife came streaking across the ground, and it was she who snatched Opus from a watery grave.

And there, before the all-seeing eye of the clicking camera, the scene of the double reconciliation was filmed; Opus and his camera-wife injecting all the time-worn comedy business into their making up, and Enoch and Evergreen acting with a seriousness that was excruciatingly funny.

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Finally came the delighted roar of the director, "Cut!" The camera ceased to click.

"Somethin' tells me," announced Mr. Clump to his assistant, "that this picture is gwine be a lollypaloosa!"

The journey back to Birmingham in the rented flivver was a not unpleasant one for Mr. and Mrs. Enoch Tapp. At the wheel was Florian Slappey, who grinned reminiscently over the excitement of the immediate past. In the tonneau were the united couple; Enoch limp and languid and forgiving, Evergreen thoroughly cured and contrite.

"Ise th'oo with the movies, Enoch honey."

"Tha's good, sweetness. Also I might say that the movies is th'oo with me."

Silence, and then—"How come you to act so funny, Enoch?"

"Thought they was killin' you maybe."

"M-m-m!" She shook her head. "You was a heap closer to bein' kilt."

"True words what you remarks."

"An' you done it fo' me?"

"I woul'n't do it fo' nobody else."

"Darlin'!"

"Trouble with pitcher actin'," remarked the bruised and battered Enoch Tapp, "is this: It ain't got no sense to it."

And late that night in the projection room of



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the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., there was a private showing of the day's rushes. Present were Orifice R. Latimer, president of the company; Director J. Cæsar Clump; Actors Opus Randall and Welford Potts; the cutter, the artist and the title writer. The narrow, stuffy little room rocked with their outbursts of merriment.

"Dawg-gone my hide if that ain't the funniest pitcher I ever did see! Look at that long, lanky Enoch Tapp! Ain't he the laughittinest man in the world? Ain't he though? Oh, look! Watch him take that dive outa the wheel!"

The verdict was unanimous. The comedy of the unfortunate Mr. Tapp was doubly rib-tickling because of its very sincerity. Cæsar Clump was talking.

"If us could only use it! Wiggilin' tripe, if on'y we could! Hit what us would make!"

The basso profundo of Orifice R. Latimer came through the darkness.

"We can," he pronounced.

"How come?"

"Ise gwine see Lawyer Evans Chew. He can fix it."

"How?"

"Dunno how. But Lawyer Chew can fix anything."



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The following morning at eleven o'clock the life of Mr. Enoch Tapp had apparently returned to normalcy. Mr. Tapp was busily engaged in trimming a lawn on Cliff Road and Mr. Tapp was whistling happily as he labored. He did not even look up when a car stopped at the curb, and it was only when Lawyer Chew accosted him that his attention became diverted from his work.

Lawyer Chew stated his mission. He had come, he said, as the representative of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. He explained to Mr. Tapp that there had been a gross misunderstanding and that the Midnight was excessively regretful.

"Us desires to make restitution an' also recompense, Mistuh Tapp. Of course, by the laws of this noble and sov'ern state of Alabama, as statutorily made an' duly pervided, we ain't got no li'bility; but we feels that you has suffered, an' so just to keep you friends with us, I has been authorized to offer you a cash settlement fo' same."

Enoch Tapp dropped the handle of his lawn mower.

"Says which?"

"Does you sign this heah paper releasin' the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., fum all

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li'bility, I gives you herewith fifty dollars in cash money."

Enoch gazed at the paper which the attorney presented. Then he looked upon the five crisp new yellow-back ten-dollar bills. This was the first time it had occurred to him that the Mid-night owed him anything.

"I—I gits fifty dollars fo' what has a'ready done happened?"

"Uh-huh; cash money."

"An' that paper?"

"Releases us fum all li'bility," returned Lawyer Chew craftily, "an' gives us the right to the pitchers we took down at the mill."

Enoch Tapp probed no more deeply. The fact that he had been photographed in a ridiculous dilemma did not occur to him; all he saw was this gift of fifty dollars. Without further argument, he signed the document and accepted the money. Lawyer Chew sped back to the company's offices.

"Got him!" he exulted. "He has released us fum all li'bility an' also this paper he signed says that he was an actor with us an' that we has got full rights to make, publish, release and distribute any pitchers of him which was took up to an' prior from the date of these presents. Now you boys go to it!"

The boys went to it. For two days there

were many conferences and much industry in the mechanical departments of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. Orifice R. Latimer was impressed into service to reauthor his two-reel scenario, and eventually the task was completed. And then word was sent out through Darktown that on the following night there would be a trial showing of *The Old Mill Scream* at the Champion Theater before sending the completed film to the distributors in New York.

Evergreen was only human. At dinner that night she put out a feeler.

"What you doin' to-night, Enoch?"

"Nothin'."

"Not nothin'?"

"No-o. Why?"

"Down at the Champeen Theater they is showin' *The Old Mill Scream*, an'——"

"Ain't goin'."

"Aw, Enoch! Why?"

"Hates pitchers; specially that one."

"But, Enoch, listen! Tha's the fust pitcher ever I was in, an' I craves to see how does I act."

"You acts foolish."

"Enoch, please."

"H'm! Wimmin ain't got no sense."

"I ain't never gwine act ag'in."

He sighed.

"Oh, all right, if you just nachelly got to look at yo'se'f. Git yo' hat, woman; git yo' hat."

Eighteenth Street was ablaze with lights when they arrived. The Champion Theater was packed almost to capacity, but a grinning usher found two seats down near the front for Mr. and Mrs. Enoch Tapp. J. Cæsar Clump saw them enter and ducked to safety.

It was a galla social occasion, this first showing on any screen of a locally made picture. The house was only slightly interested in the tribulations of an asbestos heroine in the feature film, and a gasp of anticipation, accompanied by a salvo of applause, went up as there was flashed on the screen:

THE MIDNIGHT PICTURES  
CORPORATION, INC.,

Orifice R. Latimer, Pres't,  
Presents

THE OLD MILL SCREAM  
A Howling Comedy in Two Reels  
by Orifice R. Latimer

Then came the introduction of characters: the leading woman, Opus Randall, Welford

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Potts, the bathing girls. After which this caption was flung forth:

Legs Maglump—Mr. Enoch Tapp

Evergreen felt the long fingers of her husband tighten spasmodically on her arm.

“Hey, look at that!”

Evergreen was looking. So was every spectator. For the bit of film selected to introduce this newest member of the cast was that which showed him clambering madly through the mill machinery in search of his wife. The house rocked with merriment.

“Enoch Tapp! Just cast yo’ eyes on them feller!”

“Oh, you Enoch!”

Mr. Tapp half rose from his seat. Evergreen, eyes distended, clutched him.

“Where at you goin’, honey?”

“Ise goin’ out to commit me a murder.” He saw Lawyer Evans Chew on the row ahead. “Lawyer Chew, Ise gwine sue these folks.”

“You ain’t gwine sue nobody,” grinned the genial attorney. “Ain’t you done took fifty dollars an’ signed a writin’ that you was an actor in that pitcher?”

Enoch sank back with a groan. He gazed

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wildly about, but the jammed aisles made escape impossible, and so, even more miserable than he had been during the filming of the comedy, he writhed through the two laugh-provoking reels.

The Midnight staff had done an excellent job. The story was transformed and the scenes containing the lugubrious countenance of Enoch Tapp had been interpolated with exceeding cleverness. Really, the dignified Mr. Tapp was the entire picture. Also there was no doubting the fact that *The Old Mill Scream* marked the pinnacle of the company's comedy efforts. The audience roared with laughter, and even on the occasion of Enoch's most pronounced discomfiture cheered loudly and gleefully.

As for the unwilling star, he was wallowing in the dankest depths of despair. This was more than he could bear, and he realized that his hands were tied. His one desire was to retire from the world and to remain retired for the balance of his natural life. But his groans were drowned in the delirious enthusiasm of the spectators, who greeted his every agonizing antic with shrieks of glee.

Finally, the ordeal ended, the house lights were flashed on and Enoch Tapp rose furiously to his feet. And then he was seen and recog-

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nized. Grim-jawed, he faced his tormentors. But instead of the broadside of derision which he expected, there beat upon his astonished eardrums a roar of acclaim.

"Enoch Tapp! Yonder he is, the best movin'-pitcher actor in the world!"

"Enoch, you is a wonder!"

"We is fo' you, Brother Tapp!"

"Oh, you Enoch!"

It penetrated slowly; but it did penetrate. Enoch's shoulders went back and his exit became a dignified triumphal march. People shook his hand and patted him on the back. He even accepted the congratulations of Orifice R. Latimer and J. Cæsar Clump.

"Well," he confessed to Mr. Clump, "I suttinly done my best fo' you boys. I always aims to help out a Bumminham enterprise."

Throughout the night there was a general effect of anæsthesia in the Tapp home. Enoch and Evergreen did not discuss the matter very much; it was too bewildering. At 6:30 Enoch ate his breakfast and walked dazedly forth with lawn mower, sickle and shears to his day's labors. Evergreen watched him trudging up the street and there was a queer puzzled light in her eyes.

At two o'clock Enoch returned. She could



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see instantly that he was laboring under a strain.

"What you doin' home this early, Enoch?"

He flung his gardener's tools into a corner.

"I has resigned."

"Resigned? Fum what?"

"Gardenin'."

She stared.

"But, Enoch——"

"Don't but me, cullud gal. Ise th'oo with menial occupations fo'ever."

She caught his hand.

"'Splain to me, Enoch. I don't understand nothin'."

"Well, it's this way, sugar lump. Brother Orifice R. Latimer, which is president of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., sent fo' me an' tol' me that I was the best cullud actor he had ever saw an' would I sign a contrac' to act fo' them at twenty-five dollars a week."

"An' did you sign it?"

"Of course; I coul'n't do nothin' else."

"B-b-but I thought you hated pitcher-actin'."

"I do—fo' you. Ma'ied wimmin ain't got no business in the pitchers."

Evergreen was overcome with wonder and delight.

"It's plumb wonderful, Enoch. But how



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comes it that you was so vi'lent opposed to me actin' an' yet you signs up yo' ownse'f?"

Mr. Tapp smiled upon his wife in a very superior fashion.

"Well," he explained indulgently, "you and me is diff'ent. You ain't no genius."



#### *IV. A Little Child Shall Feed Them*

Shrieks of high glee rang through the stuffy projection room of The Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. From overhead came the clickety-click of the machine as the day's rushes were flashed on the screen and dark faces in the dark room were decorated with broad and triumphant smiles.

The cause of the merriment was easily discerned. Upon the silver sheet members of the Midnight's resident company cavorted merrily about in the tried-and-true habiliments of slapstick comedy—but their studied professional efforts were totally eclipsed by the work of an eight-year-old boy who had been impressed into service solely because the scenario demanded the services of a child actor.

The roaring voice of Orifice R. Latimer reverberated through the room as he stared fascinatedly upon the polished ebony countenance of little Excelsior Nix.

"Jes' look at that boy, will you: fling yo' eyes on him an' keep 'em flang. Ain't he a wonder?"

From the gloom came the answering voice of Director J. Cæsar Clump: "Di'n't I tell you,

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Orifice? Di'n't I say the minute we taken that fust scene that Excelsior was gwine run away with the pitcher?"

"Golly Moses. . . . Hey, you feller in the projection room—run them las' two scenes over again. I craves to laugh some more."

The screen was not cluttered with plot at the present moment: it was a mere showing of random scenes just as they had been filmed—chance bits of hilarious comedy, which, when all of the episodes should have been shot, would be cut and trimmed and titled and fitted into their proper places.

"See that li'l boy work. Sufferin' Tripe! Ise libel to bust a suspender laughin'. Never seen no sech actin' in all my life. Has you ever saw'n a smile like his'n?"

The spectators agreed vociferously that they never had. The juvenile discovery was in the process of smiling—a slow, half-frightened, half-knowing grin which started tremulously at the corners of his broad-lipped mouth and spread infectiously to his very ears. It was a funny smile and a human smile and a smile which was utterly irresistible.

Adult members of the negro picture company were present in force, and for the nonce professional jealousy was forgotten as they united in praise of little Excelsior Nix. Within

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the room was the electric sensation of great events beginning to happen: each person there sensed that this impromptu showing marked an epoch in the history of The Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. The impossible had happened: a star had been discovered—a diamond in the rough—and not so very rough at that.

“Folks,” bellowed President Latimer, “you is feastin’ yo’ eyes upon the cullud Jackie Coogan.”

“Hot dam! Orifice—you sho’ said somethin’ that time.”

“We has got in our midst the swellest chile actor of all time. When that fillum gits showed th’oo the country Midnight pitchers is gwine become famous. An’ believe me, there ain’t never gwine be no mo’ Midnight pitchers which ain’t got that angel face in ’em. Nossuh—nary one. Cæsar Clump, I suttinly got it to han’ it to you fo’ ’scoverin’ that boy. Where at did you git him?”

“Jus’ foun’ him,” retorted the director modestly. From the darkness came a disgusted snort, but the creator of that snort did not speak aloud. Instead, Mr. Florian Slappey camouflaged himself more effectually in the blackness.

“Jus’ foun’ him?” mused Mr. Slappey. “Why,

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dawg-gone his ornery hide; I tol' him Excelsior was a chile wonder an' tha's how come him to hire the boy."

But even when Orifice R. Latimer showered praises upon the head of the diminutive director, Florian Slappey did not unduly advertise his presence in the projection room. The gist of the conversation was immensely interesting to Mr. Slappey and he was desirous of hearing more—considerably more.

He heard it. Opus Randall, paunchy funny man, and Welford Potts, slender comedian, agreed clamorously that even their magnificent efforts were dimmed by the flaming genius of Excelsior Nix. They concurred loudly in the prophecy that Excelsior was shortly to become a screen sensation and that through the filming of the youngster's divine histrionic spark fame and fortune was to become the lot of Birmingham's own colored company.

"What we want to do," said Orifice Latimer, "is to train that boy tho'ough—an' meanwhile see that nobody else don't git their han's on him."

A dark figure sidled across the room. It moved cautiously and unobtrusively. A door opened and closed again. Latimer looked around.

"Who was that?"

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"Florian Slappey."

"How come him to be heah?"

"I brung him in," admitted J. Cæsar Clump. "He was just hangin' 'roun'."

"Pff! He's always hangin' 'roun'. What I ain't got fo' that Florian Slappey is no use. Some day I is gwine step on him."

"Brother—I'll help," came the voice of Wel-ford Potts, comedian. "Florian Slappey is the most uselessest cullud man I knows."

Even then J. Cæsar Clump did not bother to defend his friend. Cæsar was riding high on a tidal wave of approbation and he had no mind to give Florian Slappey any credit for that gentleman's considerable share in discovering the boy wonder who now smiled alluringly at them from the screen. As a matter of fact J. Cæsar Clump was glad that Florian had departed, for now—freed from Mr. Slappey's embarrassing presence—he could go into details of how and why and when and where he personally had discovered Excelsior Nix.

Meanwhile Florian edged out of the old warehouse which did duty as a studio for the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. He walked to Eighteenth Street, turned right, and swung swiftly through the civic center of Birmingham's Darktown, continuing southward until he paused at length before a modest frame



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cottage which nestled cozily back of a row of shrubs. There he paused for a final summing up of his racing thoughts.

Mr. Slappey was on edge. His nimble brain was working overtime and he was experiencing difficulty in keeping up with it. He was very bitter against J. Cæsar Clump for appropriating all of the praise for Excelsior's discovery and he just naturally despised the other dignitaries of the Midnight.

Also, Florian realized that Opportunity was extending the hand of friendship and Mr. Slappey was not disinclined to shake. "Ideas," murmured Florian beatifically, "ideas is the only things I ain't got nothin' else but."

He advanced to the porch and rapped on the door. It was opened by the Widow Nix who smiled genially at sight of her sartorially superb visitor.

Florian gazed upon her—but his eyes were coldly critical and it was obvious that he was unimpressed by her youth and pulchritude. Mr. Slappey's interest in the Widow Nix was insultingly impersonal; she represented merely a vital cog in the business machine which he proposed to build.

"Mis' Nix," he opened, "how is li'l' Excelsior to-night?"

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"Fine, Brother Slappey; just fine. He's sleepin'——"

"Tired fum wukkin' in the movies?"

"Uh-huh. But he loves it."

"He wa'n't skeered, was he?"

"No-o. That cullud chile ain't skeered of nothin'. An' actin' is the fondest thing he is of."

"H-m-m! He's kind of crazy 'bout me, too, ain't he, Mis' Nix?"

"Lawsy, yes, Brother Slappey. He thinks you is the grandest man—an' why shoul'n't he? Ain't you done enough fo' him sence he was knee-high to a drop of rain? Di'n't you teach him to play baseball an' swim an' shoot, an' ain't you taken him on picnics?—— I guess, Brother Slappey, that Excelsior is 'bout as fond of you as he is of me an' tha's a fack."

Florian smiled warmly. "Thanks, Mis' Nix. It shuah makes me feel good to heah you say such. I aims to be a friend to you."

"You suttinly is, Brother Slappey. Ain't nobody mo' friendlier than you."

"Good. Now lemme ast you some questions."

"Shoot."

"How much is the Midnight payin' you fo' lettin' Excelsior act fo' them?"

"Ten dollars a week," she proclaimed

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proudly. "Think of a eight-yeah-ol' boy makin' that much."

"Ise thinkin'. Ten dollars a week, huh? Fo' how many weeks?"

"'Til they finishes needin' him in this pitcher."

"An' after that?"

"Shuh, Brother Slappey—they ain't said nothin' 'bout after that. I reckon they just schemes to use my li'l' lamb fo' this one pitcher."

Florian rose. "Tha's all, Mis' Nix. Guess I'll be driftin'."

"Won't you sit awhile?"

"Sorry, but Ise busy. See you in the mawnin', Mis' Nix."

From the Nix home Mr. Slappey pursued a rapid way to the pretentious residence of Lawyer Evans Chew, Birmingham's foremost colored legal light. Closeted with that erudite attorney, Florian broke forth into a torrent of terse and pertinent questions to which Lawyer Chew returned verbose and sonorous answers.

But eventually an understanding was reached and the two men repaired to the office of the lawyer on the seventh floor of the Penny Prudential Bank Building. There, until two o'clock in the morning, the goggled attorney labored heavily over a typewriter until certain

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very formal documents were duly and legally drawn. Then they adjourned to Bud Peaglar's Barbecue Lunch Room and Billiard Parlor to partake of large bowls of steaming Brunswick stew.

The following morning Mrs. Nix was summoned to the offices of Lawyer Chew where she found Florian Slappey—haggard but eager.

"Mis' Nix—you tol' me las' night that this heah company was on'y payin' you ten dollars a week fo' li'l' Excelsior."

"Only! Ain't ten dollars a week enough?"

"Not hahdly. Leastways, I don't think so."

"Golly! You suttinly got big-thinkin' idees 'bout my honey-boy."

"Yassum, I has. An' as you know, I is fearful fon' of him. Now I asts you this straight out, Mis' Nix: Would you be willin' to sign a contrac' fo' Excelsior's pitcher-actin' fo' one year at fifteen dollars a week whether he wukked or not?"

Mrs. Nix leaned forward excitedly. "Fifteen dollars a week—fo' one whole yeah?"

"Presac'ly."

"No matter didn't he wuk a tall?"

"No matter that."

"Brother Slappey, you talks foolishment.

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Who gwine make any such of a contrac' fo' my Excelsior?"

Florian's eyes flashed. "I am!"

"Says who?"

"Says I am. An' Ise comin' straight with you, Mis' Nix. I aims to make a profit on li'l Excelsior. If I c'n git mo' fo' his services than fifteen dollars a week, I plans to pocket the diff'ence, but if I is payin' you that fifteen a week fo' one yeah, I reckon tha's fair, ain't it?"

"Mistuh Slappey—you said somethin' that time."

"Good." Florian turned to his attorney. "I is playin' square with her, ain't I?"

"You are most decidedly doing same, Brother Slappey an' I commend you unrestricted. You binds yo'se'f fo' fifteen dollars a week fo' fifty-two weeks, come which might. If you gits mo' than that, you makes a profit. Does you git less you is plumb out of luck—but anyway you look at it, Mis' Nix gits her money."

Mrs. Nix made it quite clear that she was enthusiastically agreeable. Thereupon they proceeded to the courthouse where, in a short space of time, Florian Slappey was made the legal guardian of little Excelsior Nix for the period of one year from date. He was empowered to enter into contracts for Excelsior's

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theatrical services, and the judge approved the contract clause which protected the child's mother by providing that should Florian default in two consecutive weekly payments, his guardianship would terminate and the contract become null and void, provided Mrs. Nix elected to have it do so.

When they left the courthouse, Florian handed Mrs. Nix fifteen dollars—advance payment for the first week. Then, treading on air, he strolled languidly downtown to await developments.

They were not long in coming. Two days later Orifice R. Latimer cornered Mrs. Nix. The two days had developed clearly and conclusively that Excelsior was a gold mine—provided he was properly exploited.

"Mis' Nix," volunteered Orifice, "li'l' Excelsior ain't such a rotten actor."

"What you mean: rotten actor?"

"Well, I mean he's all right—on'y he don't know much an' you never can tell 'bout chillun. Now us has got an idea that maybe we is willin' to teach him somethin', previded we gits a long contrac' fum you."

She frowned slightly. "'Splain yo'se'f, Brother Latimer—'splain yo'se'f."

Orifice was crafty. "What us craves to do, Mis' Nix, is to sign Excelsior up fo' a long

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period of time at ten dollars a week, an'——"

Resentment flamed in the maternal breast. "Ten dollars a week. Where at does you git that ten dollars a week stuff, Mistuh Lati-mer?"

"Tha's a heap of money fo' a li'l' boy to make."

"Well"—firmly—"I ain't gwine sign no contrac' with you fo' no ten dollars a week an' tha's final."

Orifice was puzzled. This was not at all the reception he had expected, and for the moment he was nonplussed. But at the same time, he was desperate. There had been many conferences among the Midnight executives and they were unanimously agreed that Excelsior was a genuine discovery and that immediately upon the release of Sake and Forsake, his first picture, there would be a descent in force upon Birmingham by representatives of standard picture companies. It therefore behooved the Midnight to tie up Excelsior under a long-term contract before Sake and Forsake was distributed.

"You ain't gittin' but ten dollars now, Mis' Nix."

"Ain't gittin' but don't mean I won't git more."

"H-m-m!" Orifice rubbed the palms of his



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hands together unctuously. "We offers you a th'ee-yeah contrac' at ten dollars a week. "Tha's one thousand five hund'ed an' sixty dollars cash money, an' all you has got to do in all that time is nothin'. Excelsior learns how to act, an'——"

"Mistuh Latimer," said Mrs. Nix firmly and politely, "you is just th'owin' good breff after bad."

"S'posin' I said twelve dollars a week?"

"Nothin' stirrin'."

"Fifteen?"

"Nope."

"Seventeen-fifty?"

Mrs. Nix hesitated: a gleam appeared in her eyes. Seventeen-fifty a week for three years: that was wealth comparable only to that possessed by the late Mr. Cræsus. Orifice hastened to press his advantage. He talked long and fluently, but when he finished it was upon her nod of negation.

"Sorry, Mistuh Latimer, but I cain't."

"Mean you won't, tha's what."

"Don't mean nothin' of the kind."

"I don't see——"

"Well, the truth of it is, Brother Latimer—does you crave to have Excelsior act in some mo' pitchers fo' you, you have got to see his legal guardeen."

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"Says which?"

"His legal guardeen, app'inted by the Jedge of the Co't."

Orifice was dazed. "Wh—who is this guardeen, woman?"

"Florian Slappey!"

Mr. Orifice R. Latimer sat down suddenly and completely. The full measure of the catastrophe did not strike him immediately, but he did know that something very terrible had happened with himself and his company as happennees.

"Florian Slappey! That no-good, dressed-up, non-workin' brown-skinned piece of——"

"Don't you go straducin' Mistuh Slappey; he's my friend, also Excelsior's, which is crazy 'bout him."

"Yeh—crazy is right. Fo' Gawd's sake, gal, since when did Florian git to be Excelsior's guardeen?"

"Day befo' yestiddy."

"How?"

Briefly and graphically she imparted details and when Orifice Latimer returned to the offices of the Midnight Pictures Corporation it was to pour his woeful tale into ears which wagged in sorrow.

"Tha's what you done, Cæsar Clump, in-witin' that skinny buzzard into our projection

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room to see them rushes. He hear'n us talkin' 'bout what a Jackie Coogan Excelsior was gwine be—an' now look where he has got us: just look."

"Ise lookin', Chief—but I don't see nothin'."

"You ain't got the 'bility to see nothin' no-how. Where is we at: I asks you that? Minute us releases Sake and Forsake, somebody is gwine grab off that youngster at 'bout fifty or maybe even a hund'ed dollars a week. P'raps more. That means we has got to buy out Florian's contrac', no matter how much price we has to pay—an' you know good an' well Florian ain't gwine let us down easy sence that last time we ruined his best pair of pants escortin' him out of the studjo."

"Tha's right." It was Welford Potts speaking. "Florian shuah ain't lovin' us none an' he's gwine stick us heavy as he can."

J. Cæsar Clump looked up suddenly. "You say he has got to pay the Widow Nix fifteen dollars a week?"

"Uh-huh."

"An' he gits whatever li'l' Excelsior makes?"

"Yeh."

"Then," snapped Mr. Clump, "it's up to us to see that Excelsior don't make nothin' after we finishes with Sake and Forsake."

"But we want him."

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"Sure we do, but we ain't cravin' to git helt up, is we? You know good an' well Florian is figgerin' that we is gwine keep Excelsior busy an' that we must do it at his price; that gives him a good profit right away. All we got to do is to keep the boy fum earnin' any money an' then I asts you where will Florian git that fifteen dollars a week at?"

"Shuh! He can git it somewheres."

"Yes he can—not. He's broke as that last pitcher comp'ny you promoted, Orifice, an' his credick ain't wuth one cent on the dollar. On'y way he can get fifteen a week is fo' us to wuk Excelsior an' does we lay off that lad his contrac' of gardeenship exterminates. Then we sign the kid up fo' th'ee years an' either use him to git our company famous or else peddle him to some big concern."

There was a ripple of endorsement, but President Latimer shook his head. "We got to do it in six weeks, Cæsar."

"How come?"

"Tha's the release date for Sake and Forsake. Does we hold it beyond that us pays a forfeit to the distributor, an' we is operatin' on a too close margin fo' that. And if we once releases the pitcher—blooie!"

"Hmph! Florian cain't raise no fifteen dol-

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lars a week fo' six weeks. Remember, he has got to live, too."

Orifice was melancholy. "Ise willin' to make talk with you-all ag'in after I has sawn Mistuh Slappey. But if he'll take thutty dollars a week fo' a yeah an' if we can git Excelsior's Ma to make a contrac' at the same price fo' two mo' yeahs after the end of the fust one, with her-se'f as guardeen, then Ise gwine do it."

"You is foolish, Brother Latimer."

"You says words, Cæsar, but they don't mean nothin'. Ise goin' down to see Florian."

The interview between Florian and Orifice Latimer was brief and to the point.

"What you offer?" grinned Mr. Slappey.

"What you asks?"

"I ain't namin' no prices."

"N'r neither I."

"Then us ain't gwine do no business."

"Hmm! Twenty dollars a week."

"Ain't you lib'ral? What you talks is chicken-eatments."

"A li'l boy——"

"Go on with you, Big Man. Mention money."

"Twenty-five?"

"Fuma-diddles!"

"Thutty?"

"Listen at me." Florian was elated: thirty

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had been his original figure, but Orifice's eagerness convinced him beyond all doubt that the gentleman would bid higher. "I is a heap of things, Mistuh Latimer, but one of them ain't no piker. Thutty dollars a week don't mean no mo' to me than nothin' or even less'n that."

"What's yo' price then?"

"Fifty dollars a week!"

Orifice gasped. "Great Sufferin' Spareribs! Million dollarses what you utters with yo' lips! What you ain't got in yo' haid, Brother Slap-  
pey, is no brains."

"Fifty dollars is my price."

"Nothin' doin'."

"Mutual."

A slow and righteous anger fermented in the presidential bosom of the ponderous Mr. Latimer. "Listen at me, Boy—not on'y you don't git fifty dollars fum us fo' Excelsior, but you don't git nothin'."

"Néver ast nothin', did I?"

"Well, you ain't gwine git it. Know what us is gwine do to you?"

"What?"

"Bust you."

"I don't bust easy."

"You is holdin' us up——"

"Di'n't you th'ow me out once?"

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“—An’ we don’t like bein’ helt. An’ tha’s all.”

“Same to you an’ heaps of ’em. An’ when you-all releases Sake and Forsake I guess mebbe my price fo’ Excelsior is gwine go up.”

Orifice R. Latimer stalked off, terrible fury burning in his soul. As for Florian, that gentleman was in fine fettle. He reported to the Widow Nix. She was all in favor of the immediate dollar and informed Florian that overtures for two additional years of guardianship had been made to her in the event that they found Florian amenable to reason.

Florian reminded her that she had entered into the agreement with her eyes open. “You is gwine git good money eventual, any way you looks at it, Mis’ Nix. An’ if it hadn’t of been fo’ me, you would of signed up fo’ th’ee yeahs at ten dollars a week. Ain’t that so?”

“Yeh.”

“Then ain’t I entitled to somethin’ fo’ what I done fo’ you?”

“Shuah—but s’pose they don’t never let Excelsior act no mo’?”

“They will,” returned Mr. Slappey confidently. “They got to. I want you to be salisfied—and all the profits what you makes after my year is up is happy with me.”

Mrs. Nix was bewildered but game, and



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Florian rambled downtown, his thoughts happily busy with the commotion he knew must have been created in the executive offices of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc.

But even his fondest imaginings were far from the truth. Prominent members of the company heard of Florian's stand and a fierce resentment crystallized against him.

"He's settled, fixed an' done fo'!" sizzled Orifice. "I wouldn't do no business with him now if we never git Excelsior ag'in. Fifty dollars a week!"

"What you fixin' to do, Chief?"

"Bust him! Bust him higher'n a kite! Bust him so hahd they'll have to scrape him up in a shovel. I ain't gwine use Excelsior no mo'. Ise gwine hold Sake and Forsake until the last release minute. An' Ise gwine do ev'ything I can to see that nobody don't lend Florian no money. Then we'll see how long he can keep on payin' Mis' Nix fifteen dollars a week 'thout nothin' comin' in."

Welford Potts nodded assent. "Wise wisdom you speaks, Brother Latimer. Squash him, tha's what I says."

And so there and then the squashing process started. J. Cæsar Clump did his part on the lot in the next few days when he completed all of the scenes in which Excelsior was to ap-

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pear; and the child was promptly paid off and dismissed.

That caused Florian a slight degree of apprehension. The worst he had figured upon was the necessity for producing each week—over and above personal living expenses—the five dollars representing the difference between ten dollars earned by Excelsior and his fifteen dollars contractual obligation. Here, however, he was confronted by the need for fifteen dollars surplus coin each seven days.

He knew exactly what was happening; he realized that this exhibition of strength was in reality nothing but an indication of the company's weakness. Whereupon he set grimly out to finance his project.

The success which blessed his efforts was amazing by its absence. Mr. Slappey was given to understand that his credit was slightly less solid than a drink of water. Virtually every source of colored credit in Birmingham had been disastrously exploited by Florian in years past and they were not even inclined to discuss with him the details of his present predicament. He approached professional money lenders—chiefly Semore Mashby—and the reception accorded him was woefully discouraging. "Woul'n't loaned you a dime if you owned a gold mine. Now, git out!"

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Lawyer Evans Chew was equally unresponsive. "Cain't butt into my clients' affairs, Florian. Also I represent the Midnight as well as you, an' fum bofe of you I is an attorney an' not no money broker."

Florian quested for a job, but discovered that other folks' ideas of Mr. Slappey's worth did not coincide with those held by Mr. Slappey. He learned that references were valuable and the only references which Florian obtained he was wise enough to keep hidden. It struck him suddenly that his own maximum earning capacity was fifteen dollars a week, and the only job offered at that figure was of a nature which offended Mr. Slappey's esthetic senses.

He ransacked his trunk and produced many forgotten bits of near-jewelry. These went sadly into the clutches of a pawnbroker: the proceeds were pitiful, but they tided Mr. Slappey over a second week. Then his watch departed and after that his signet ring and scarf pin. By the time the fourth week was under way, Florian found himself confronted with the necessity of parting with his most cherished possession: his wardrobe.

Square-jawed, he engineered the deal. His dinner jacket, his pleated shirts, his super-elegant sack suits—and when the fifth week began Mr. Slappey was barren of raiment save

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for the garments which at the moment concealed his nudity from an inquisitive world.

Only one avenue of escape was open to him. He mourned around the Terminal Station all one morning at the beginning of the sixth week and, when the Piedmont Limited rolled in from New York, buttonholed his Pullman porter friend, Epic Peters, and into the large ears of that gangling railroader poured all of his troubles.

Epic was fond of Florian and willing to help him out. But! Always that But. Epic was more than mildly solvent, but Epic's surplus cash was tied up in a multitude of investments. He possessed no immediate income save salary and tips and they were pouring into the liquidation of his overhead.

"Can you hol' out two mo' weeks, Florian?"

"Yeh—mebbe so. But beans does git kind of monotonous. I tell you, Epic——"

"You don't have to tell me nothin', Brother Slappey. I knows it a'ready an' my heart aches that I cain't do nothin'. What I was thinkin' was this: Week after next when I gits to New Yawk, there is a Pullman porter runnin' 'tween there an' Washin'ton which owes me seventy-five dollars, an' the minute he pays same, I is willin' to loaned it to you. What you say?"

Florian said yes: it was a case of tiny favors

being muchly appreciated. He borrowed a little money on his life insurance; sold some old shoes and some new silk socks and established a brief credit at Bud Peaglar's.

Meanwhile, Mr. Slappey had been spending his days with little Excelsior Nix. Florian was genuinely fond of the sunny youngster—nor was this affection a new thing. For three weeks now they had been together constantly; roaming the woods on Red Mountain, playing ball, plunking BB shot into a homemade target. The child wonder fairly adored Mr. Slappey which was one reason why the Widow Nix did not become more violent in her importunities.

"If you loves Excelsior half as much as he does you, Mistuh Slappey, I knows you woul'n't do nothin' which wasn't best fo' him—an' so I sits back content. But it does seem like to me that you is foolish."

Florian was touched. Perhaps, after all, he had been a trifle hard-boiled; perhaps in his eagerness to wreak satisfaction from the picture company, he had been unfair to the child. Actuated by sheer nobility plus a decidedly empty tummy, Florian obtained an interview with Orifice B. Latimer. Mr. Latimer bestowed upon his visitor a hostile, frosty smile.

"Mawnin', Mistuh Slappey. I hope you is hungry this mawnin'."

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"No. Ise done et two breakfasts a'ready." Florian did not explain that he meant in the course of the last week.

"What can I do you fo' this mawnin', Mistuh Slappey?"

Florian gazed hungrily at the well-fed executive. "I come to see you about Excelsior Nix."

"What about him?"

"You craves to have him act fo' yo' comp'ny, an'——"

"Don't know what you is talkin' about. Us ain't intrusted in Excelsior Nix, n'r neither you."

"But didn't you offer me thutty dollars a week?"

"Didn't we offer ain't does offer. We ain't doin' no business with you nohow an' don't care does we never git that chile."

Panic struck at Florian's soul. "Mistuh Latimer," he pleaded, "Ise willin' to assept yo' offer of thutty dollars a week fo' that contrac'."

"Ain't intrusted."

"Twenty-five?"

"Not ten cents, Florian Slappey. You tried to hold us up an' we don't hold. Git out!"

Florian got. A wet and dripping mantle of gloom had settled upon his narrow shoulders. Here he was a considerable bit beyond the end of his resources. Already he had invested sev-



enty-five dollars in cash in the deal for Excelsior's services, had scraped and borrowed and begged the ultimate available nickel—and now the company refused to do business with him under any circumstances.

Florian was at the end of his rope and he knew it. Perhaps it had been a mistake to incur the enmity of so affluent and powerful a personage as Orifice R. Latimer: Florian was inclined to think that it was. He was even sure of it.

Of course he realized that a little money now marked the difference between success and failure. If only Epic came across immediately with that promised seventy-five: that would finance Florian for another five weeks and he knew that the Midnight could not hold out that long. He didn't know much about the picture industry but he did know that the company was under contract with its distributor to furnish a two-reel comedy every four weeks, and that Sake and Forsake could not be withheld longer than two or three weeks more and that once it was exhibited in the hundred or more first-run houses which used the negro comedies there would be offers from other organizations which would mean profit to him.

His was a position which made the famous situation of Mr. Tantalus appear happy by



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comparison. The cup was before his lips: he could even taste—but he couldn't swallow. Epic Peters was his last hope and Epic was even then on the way to New York with his train. If only nothing went wrong——

Florian defaulted one payment. Horror ate at his heart when he informed the Widow Nix of his inability to give her the stipulated fifteen dollars. She did not seem particularly unhappy—Florian suspected that she had been in conference with Orifice Latimer.

"Tha's all right, Mistuh Slappey. Don't you bother 'bout that fifteen dollars. But of course if you don't pay it next week also, yo' contrac' fo' being guardeen to li'l' Excelsior don't hold no more."

Florian sighed. "Sad words which you expresses, Mis' Nix."

Their eyes turned toward the grinning youngster about whom the whirlwind blustered. Florian extended a hand to the boy.

"Le's us go out in the woods, Excelsior."

"Yassuh, Florian—if Ma'll let me."

Ma let. Under the trees of Shades Valley with the boy much of Florian's depression fell from him. They played ball and tried to fish in a little stream—and then they talked; somehow they had always been buddies—talking to each other as man-to-man: eight years and

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thirty. And during the past four weeks of heartbreak and stress Florian had found comfort in the intimate companionship of the child.

And now it was all to end. Florian was on the brink of forfeiting his rights under the contract—and of finding himself stripped of clothes and hope. He stroked the head of his youthful companion——

“’Tain’t yo’ fault, Excelsior. Us suttinly has been buddies, eh?”

“Yassuh, Florian. Yassuh, we has. An’ I love you.”

“I’ll bet. Now le’s git fer home. Ma’ll be waitin’.”

Orifice R. Latimer was marking time. The Widow Nix had duly reported to him the default in one weekly payment. Already—in fond anticipation of Florian’s default on the second and fatal week—Lawyer Chew had arranged to terminate Florian’s guardianship, to have Mrs. Nix declared legal guardian of her son’s theatrical future—and contracts had been drawn and signed between Mrs. Nix and the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., by which Excelsior was the property of the Midnight for three years at a salary of thirty dollars a week.

The next few days were anxious ones for both Florian and the Midnight officials. Mr.

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Slappey struggled heroically to prove that the human body does not require food—and Orifice Latimer and his cohorts were praying that ill luck might attend Florian's efforts.

“ ’Tain't like he on'y needed fifteen dollars. He's got to git thutty by this Saddy an' he cain't do it. Ain't nobody willin' to loaned it to him—and then we has Excelsior fo' three years. It's gwine be a big day fo' us——”

Friday at noon Epic Peters was due from New York. Florian was at the Terminal Station to meet him—and he suffered agonies during the two hours that the train was late. Finally it appeared: dust-caked and groaning.

Epic was not there!

Stark, staring misery came to Mr. Slappey. Numb with horror, he instituted inquiries at the Pullman office and learned that while in New York Epic had eaten not wisely but too well and was consequently laying off for an indefinite period.

Florian sought the curb, where he sat huddled for fifteen or twenty minutes, staring with unseeing eyes at the welter of traffic which swirled before the imposing portals of the huge station. At length he rose and staggered downtown—an abject figure: a man from whom victory had been snatched brutally and

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without warning—a man stripped of his dignity and his clothes.

There was absolutely nothing he could do and he did it determinedly. The day passed on leaden feet and by eight the following morning Florian had ceased to be the legal guardian of Excelsior Nix. Mrs. Nix had supplanted him and already her contract with the Midnight was in force.

It was a gala day for Mrs. Nix. Gone forever was the necessity for arduous labor and continuous skimping. She was sorry for Florian, of course—Florian had made this affluence possible, but even Florian had admitted to her that business was business and that she was justified in contracting with the Midnight, should he be unable to fulfill his end of the contract with her.

But the real glee was present on the lot of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. President Orifice R. Latimer was patting his own back and congratulating himself on his astuteness. Not only had he secured a potential gold mine but also he had outfought a man who had apparently secured a strangle hold. There was a long session of hearty handshaking and ribald congratulations—and then Mrs. Nix and her youngster were sent for. They arrived in President Latimer's flivver coupé.

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The new continuity was ready; the company in costume. Orifice bustled forward to greet his juvenile asset.

"Well, well, well!" he enthused. "Heah we is at las'. I bids you good mawnin', Mis' Nix. A ve'y good mawnin'." He stroked Excelsior's woolly head. "An' how is our chile progeny this mawnin'?"

Excelsior turned wide eyes upon the rotund figure of his boss, but no smile appeared on Excelsior's lips.

"Mawnin'," he murmured bashfully.

J. Cæsar Clump conducted Excelsior to the waiting set. Already Sake and Forsake was en route to New York and there was little time to lose on this new picture in which Excelsior was to be featured.

Gently and kindly J. Cæsar—before the admiring and approving eyes of the organization—explained to little Excelsior the work which he was supposed to do in that particular scene. "An' now," he finished, "le's see you try it."

"Huh?"

"Le's see you try it. You come in th'oo that do' yonder an' you see Mistuh Randall standin' there an' begin shootin' at him, see?"

"Huh?"

"C'mon now, Excelsior. Commence."

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There was a breathless pause. Excelsior entered the door as per instructions. Then, quite without warning, he paused, seated himself forcibly, opened his lips and unleashed a wail of agony which could be heard all through the cavernous studio.

Consternation was writ large on the faces of those who gazed upon this phenomenon. Mrs. Nix rushed forward, cuddled Excelsior to her breast and demanded an explanation. Excelsior gave it vociferously.

"Ain't goin' to do it."

"Why, Excelsior; I don't understand'——"

"I ain't goin' to do nothin' fo' these folks."

A chorus of protest and inquiry arose. Above it came the shrill childish treble:

"I want Florian!"

Premonition smote Mr. Orifice R. Latimer.

"Says which, son?"

"I want Florian."

"Florian don't work heah. He's somewhere else."

"Don't want him somewhere else. I want he should be heah."

"But listen——"

"Ain't goin' to listen an' ain't goin' to act unless Florian comes heah."

They argued with the child: they begged and pleaded and cajoled. Excelsior Nix was

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very youthful but firm. He howlingly insisted that he would not act unless Florian Slappey told him to: his shrieks, when they informed him that Florian could never set foot in the studio, were fairly awe-inspiring.

All day long they struggled with the boy: their nerves were rubbed cruelly at this newest and unkindest twist of circumstance. There were frantic conferences which started nowhere and ended at the same place. At length they decided to call off work for the day and see what the morrow would bring forth.

It brought forth—and that was all. Excelsior shrieked more loudly, howled more piteously and bucked more stubbornly. And finally, in desperation, J. Cæsar Clump was despatched in search of Florian Slappey. He found that gentleman practicing on one of the green baize tables at Bud Peaglar's place. Florian was very positive.

"Does Orifice Latimer crave to make talk with me he can do it his own se'f."

"Well—all right— But come on down to the studjo."

"Any comin' which is done, Orifice puffforms. Heah is where he will find me."

Two hours passed, and at length Orifice put in appearance. He explained to Florian that



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Excelsior refused to act without Mr. Slappey's guiding hand.

"Mistuh Latimer," grinned Florian, "I would suggest that you is plumb out of luck; because if Excelsior ain't gwine ac' without me, he suttinly ain't gwine act."

"What you mean, Brother Slappey?"

"I means just that, an' I ain't yo' brother."

"But s'posin' we pays you to come down an' git Excelsior to act fo' us? S'posin' we pays you cash money?"

"Broke as I is, Mistuh Latimer—money don't mean nothin'."

"You got to come——"

"Cain't nobody say 'got to' to me. You done me dirt an' now I gits back at you."

"S'posin' our price——"

"Woul'n't do nothin' fo' you was you to gimme the whole comp'ny."

That appeared to be final. There followed two days of heartache and ill temper. Excelsior proclaimed loudly that he loved Florian, would take orders only from Florian, and would do nothing without Florian. The following morning a very humble Orifice Latimer again found Florian Slappey.

"Brother Slappey—us has got to have you."

"Ain't that sweet."

"We is payin' Excelsior thutty dollars a

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week an' he not on'y ain't doin' nothin', but seems like he's gwine do less than that fum now on. We is desprit."

"Ain't it the troof?"

"Won't you come down to the studjo an' just see what you can do?"

Florian went. At sight of him, the smile which was destined to become nationally famous shone from the child's countenance. Florian took him aside for a moment or two and held soft converse with him. Then he replaced Excelsior on the set and immediately the youngster went through his scene with all the ease and poise of a veteran and gifted actor.

Florian grinned, waved his hand, and started for the door. Immediately Excelsior emitted another howl. Orifice clutched Florian's arm.

"Stick around, Brother Slaphey. Please stick around."

"This ain't my stickin' day."

"We needs you——"

"Needs me ain't gits me. By-by."

Florian departed. The hours which followed were filled with agony and misery and suffering and childish wails. Mrs. Nix informed all and sundry that it was beautiful how fond li'l' Excelsior was of Florian Slaphey

an' he most likely never would act without Florian.

Another day—and Orifice R. Latimer's sound business judgment suffocated his overweening pride—and once again he found Florian. His paunchy figure was shrunken with worry—he was face to face with the possibility of taking a dead and absolute loss on his thirty-dollar-a-week investment.

"But we got to have you, Florian. We is in an awful hole——"

"Yeh, an' I hope the hole falls in on top of you."

"We aims to git you to come down an' take charge of Excelsior. We offers you a sal'ry."

"Hmm! How much?"

"We-e-ell——"

"When you uses that tone of voice, I see right away us ain't gwine do no business. An' just so there won't be no argument, I tells you right now that my price is thutty dollars a week on a one-year contrac'."

Orifice fell back aghast. "Boy! Silliness which you expounds. Thutty dollars a week——"

"Git out of heah, Orifice. Us ain't gwine make no talk with each other a tall. Beat it!"

Orifice beat it. For two days he fumed and fretted and mourned. J. Cæsar Clump was

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desperate. Overhead was piling up, time was growing short, a new release date was rising like a specter to haunt them.

Eventually Orifice gave in. Florian Slappey was signed, on contract for one year and at a salary of thirty dollars a week, to see that Excelsior did his best as an actor.

Florian's very first day on the lot proved that however expensive he might be, he was fully competent to carry out his end of the agreement. It was a day of sunshine and smiles and mountains of work. Excelsior was happy and tractable. At the conclusion of the day's work Orifice R. Latimer and J. Cæsar Clump came over and congratulated Florian.

"You kind of helt us up, Brother Slappey—but I think we all gits rich together. You suttinly has done noble an' I thanks you. I guess you is gwine earn yo' thutty dollars a week."

Florian cocked his head on one side. "Where you git that thutty dollars a week stuff at, Brother Latimer?"

Orifice was puzzled. "Ain't we payin' you thutty a week?"

"You suttinly is not. You is payin' me seventy-five a week."

"Foolishment what you talks!"

"Listen at me—" Florian counted off on

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his fingers. "While I had Excelsior under contrac', I was payin' him fifteen dollars a week, wasn't I?"

"Yeh."

"Well, I ain't payin' that now, so tha's fifteen Ise makin', ain't it?"

"Uh-huh."

"An' out of the thutty a week I is now gittin', I don't have to pay Mis' Nix the fifteen I would of had to pay if my contrac' was still good: ain't that so?"

"Yeh."

"Well, tha's another fifteen I makes, which I might of had to pay her, makin' thutty a week so far. An' the fifteen profit which is mine, figgerin' that my contrac' with Excelsior was still holdin' good—that makes forty-five a week I gits."

"But, Florian——?"

"Don't but me. Now all you got to do is to add to that forty-five a week which I has explained to you I is a'ready makin', the thutty dollars a week clear profit you is payin' me an' you see that my job is wuth seventy-five dollars a week to Mistuh Florian Slappey!"

The two officials stared at one another. They had profound hunches that there was something wrong with Florian's mathematics, but to discover the flaw required several hours

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of pencil and paper. Orifice made a magnificent gesture of defeat.

"Was it seven hund'ed and fifty dollars, Florian—I says you is wuth it."

Florian met him more than halfway.

"I agrees with you hearty, Brother Latimer. An' I tells you somethin' else also: li'l Excelsior Nix is wuth ev'y cent what you pays."

"I'll say he is."

"In fact, I want to esplain that you don't know how good an actor that chile is, Brother Latimer. You remember when he yelled an' cried an' carried on fo' six days 'cause he woul'n't do no actin' without me?"

"I coul'n't forgit that, Florian."

"Well, don't, Brother Latimer; don't. 'Cause I want you to understand that when you seen Excelsior cuttin' up that way, you was seein' the finest piece of chile actin' which the world has ever knew."

Orifice put a pleading hand on Florian's arm.

"'Splain to me, Brother Slappey."

"Well," obliged Florian, "it's thisaway. All the time you was keepin' Excelsior fum wuk-kin' to spite me, I was trainin' that chile to be a great actor. I was trainin' him to cry fo' me so as you folks would gimme a good job. An' Ise heah to say that I never seen an actor act

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so good. Honest, Brother Latimer, you ought to feel proud of what a genius that boy is."

"I—I is proud, Florian. I is proud an' happy. But also, Florian"—and President Latimer shuddered—"I is the least little bit sick, too."



## *V. Inside Inflammation*

Colossal misery triumphed over gladsome raiment and the appearance of Welford Potts was one of abjectness. He stumbled into the diminutive apartment of J. Cæsar Clump, flung himself on a slightly moth-eaten divan and bent a worried gaze upon the dynamic director of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc.

"Cæsar," he mourned from above a silken shirt of salmon pink, "Ise th'oo."

Mr. Clump rose and gestured. "Foolishment which you talks, Welford. What you mean: th'oo?"

"I is finished an' done fo'. My days as star fo' Midnight pitchers is numbered an' the number ain't many. President Latimer has got the idea that my new pants is on'y meant fo' me to be kicked in."

J. Cæsar bent a critical gaze upon the trousers in question: elegant things of creamy flannel constructed with the extremest of bell cuffs. "I ain't suttin he's wrong, neither, Welford. But what has yo' pants got to do with yo' job of actin'?"

"I was just speakin' figurable. When I was leavin' the studjo this evenin', Orifice Latimer

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inwited me to come into his office, an' when I got there he stahted in tellin' me that he wa'n't salisfried with how I was actin' an' mos' likely woul'n't need me no mo' after this pitcher is finished. Now, I asts you, Cæsar—and you is my director—is that fair or ain't it so?"

Cæsar walked across to the window where he stared reflectively down Avenue F. He was about of a size with his flamingly dressed visitor—but his garb was different.

J. Cæsar Clump was a motion-picture director and he didn't care who knew it. The habiliments of directoral authority sat becomingly upon him: white shirt with turned-back sport collar, flowing blue necktie, horn-rimmed goggles, knee breeches, glossy puttees and enormously long-toed shoes. His brow was furrowed with deep and intensive thought—in which there was more than a trifle of worry.

The problem of Welford Potts was immediate and disconcerting. Welford had his shortcomings, true; but then Welford was an excellent comedian and comedians were the immediate crying need of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc.

That Orifice R. Latimer, ponderous president of the highly successful negro picture company, was actually planning to discharge Welford, Mr. Clump had not the slightest

doubt—and he knew also that this abrupt termination of business relations was based chiefly on Latimer's personal distaste for the upstage actor.

He turned and inspected the worried countenance of Mr. Potts. "Welford," he confessed, "I suttinly would hate to see you fired."

"I makes that unanimous."

"You ain't so populous with the folks heah—includin' Orifice—but you is a good actor an' I craves to keep you."

"Yeh, but if Orifice says git——?"

"Then they ain't nothin' fo' you to do but git. Howsomever, Ise gwine see Brother Latimer an' discern cain't I do somethin' to change his mind."

Tears of gratitude threatened to disturb Welford's vision. "Cæsar, you suttinly is my friend——"

"Yeh—an' you better back me up, 'cause what I is gwine say to Orifice Latimer is aplenty. Ise aimin' to talk common sense to that feller, an' common sense ain't the mostest thing he appreciates. Now you just stick aroun' heah until I gits back."

"Boy! I ain't gwine do nothin' else—an' I shuah wishes us luck."

Orifice Latimer was in his private office at the Penny Prudential Bank Building. He

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smiled a greeting as the dapper little director entered.

"An' what c'n I do you fo' this evenin', Mistuh Clump?"

"Plenty." Cæsar's manner was brusque and uncompromising.

"Suttinly. Only you has to ask an' I consents. I has just heard from New York that our new pitcher, Sake and Forsake, is makin' the biggest hit we has yet done an' the exhibitors are askin' fo' mo'."

"Good. Who made that pitcher?"

"Well—" the president was inclined to be liberal—"you helped!"

"I whicked?"

"You helped."

"You is dawg-gone tootin' I helped. I directed that pitcher—an' Ise gwine direct a heap mo' fo' you folks. But one thing I ain't gwine stan', Orifice, is anybody buttin' into my work. Git that?"

It was quite obvious that Orifice got. Also that he was not particularly pleased. His feet came down flatly on the floor, his complexion shaded off from mahogany to purple. He hoisted his enormous frame upward and glowered upon this mutinous subordinate.

"Who at you is flingin' them words, Mistuh Clump?"

"You! Tha's who."

"An' how come?"

"'Cause Ise mad. Ise plumb peeved. I craves to have it out with you right heah an' now."

"Boy: you is suttinly gwine git yo' wish. Now s'posin' you calm down an' tell me what gotten you all riled up?"

Cæsar became slightly more calm. His initial outburst had been carefully staged to impress the portly chief executive: it had been calculated to shake him from his pedestal of smug self-esteem. Now that the object had been definitely accomplished, Mr. Clump was quite willing to confer calmly.

"What's this I heah you has been tellin' Welford Potts?"

Orifice grimaced with distaste. "So tha's who you is sore about, eh?"

"Yep!"

"Well, Ise a li'l' angry 'bout that feller my own se'f. What I has had of him is enough."

"You ain't aimin' to fire him, is you?"

"Ain't plannin' to do nothin' else."

"Why?"

"I ain't got no use fo' that man. All he's good fo' is to wear fancy clothes an' insult other folks. Always tellin' peoples what to do an' never doin' nothin' his own se'f."

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"He's a swell actor."

"Maybe so. But he don't do enough actin'. He's got a yaller streak. Ev'y dawg-gone time us puts him in a pitcher where he's gwine git knocked aroun' a bit, he yells that he's got to have a double. Now Ise tellin' you, Cæsar, doubles cost money an' spendin' money ain't the fondest thing I is of."

"Yeh," retorted Cæsar, not without sarcasm, "I has heard rumors of that."

"There ain't nobody else likes Welford, neither."

"Aroun' Bumminham maybe there ain't, but the pitcher fans like him an' they is the folks which we aims to please. Ise tellin' you, Orifice, Welford is a good actor—when he gits in front of the cam'ra he cuts up somethin' foolish—an' foolishment is what makes money fo' us."

"Comic actors ain't hahd to get."

"Thunder they ain't. Now I tell you that I knows Welford better'n what you does—an' he ain't half bad."

"No: he's all bad."

"An' we'd have a hahd time gettin' somebody else to do his wuk."

"Tha's just what Ise kickin' about. Ever sence he come to wuk fo' the Midnight we has been gittin' somebody else to do his wuk. Ise

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sick an' tired of hirin' doubles fo' that man—  
an' tha's where all the trouble stahted to-day:  
he come to me an' got suggestive that I should  
hiah somebody to double fo' him in that  
wrestlin' scene he has got with Opus Randall  
in this new pitcher."

J. Cæsar Clump frowned. He was quite willing to be honest—and this fact commanded an admission that Mr. Potts was going rather strong. He shook his goggled head.

"Welford shuah ought to be willin' to fight Opus Randall. Of course, Opus is a heap bigger'n him——"

"It ain't a real fight, is it? Just a movin'-pitcher scrap."

"Yeh—but them fights which you see in pitchers ain't as gentle as maybe you think. When I was wukkin' as a 'lectrician's assistant on one of the big Hollywood lots, I seen some fine actors put in the horspital fum movie fights, an' I guess Welford figures that Opus is libel to git too enthusiastic and bust him one."

"Yeh—an' I hope Opus does. 'Cause I tell you right now, Mistuh Clump—does I have to git a double fo' Welford Potts in this pitcher, there ain't gwine be no Welford in no other pitcher we turns out—an' tha's final."

Cæsar rose. "You won't," he sighed. "I



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promises that Brother Potts will act that fight with Opus."

"All right," grimly. "An' be shuah you explain to Welford that I is gwine be there to see the fight lives up to its title—an' the title is Rough and Tumble."

The attenuated actor listened impatiently to the report of his director friend, and at its conclusion he sighed hopelessly.

"Cain't be did," said Welford Potts.

"What cain't?"

"Me fightin' rough an' tumble with Opus Randall."

"How come?"

"Boy! you ain't reflectin' on what you asks me. Don't you know that I don't weigh on'y a hund'ed an' twelve pounds an' Opus weighs pretty nigh two hund'ed?"

"He's soft."

"An' Ise softer. If I acts that fight it ain't gwine be no good fight, an' that ruins the pitcher, 'cause it's the main scene in the whole business—an' if the pitcher ain't no good then Ise out of luck, anyway. So if I has just nachelly got to go lose my job, I prefers to lose it without gittin' all beat up."

Cæsar spread his arms wide in a helpless, hopeless gesture. "All right, Welford. It's yo' own fumral an' you can furnish the flowers

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an' sof' music. But Ise tellin' you heah an' now: Ise been yo' friend an' I has stood by you constant, but if you refuses to go th'oo with that fight against Opus Randall—then I fires you my own se'f."

"Aw, Cæsar——"

"I means it!"

"Positivel?"

"Uh-huh."

Welford Potts paced the room. He knew when J. Cæsar Clump was in earnest—and recognized that this was one of those occasions—and Welford Potts valued his job.

Prospect of the future, should he be forced to sever connection with the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., was not roseate: there loomed before him a drab promise of fifth-rate vaudeville and perhaps even the degradation of occasional janitoring when the theatrical business should prove bad.

His engagement with the Midnight with a consequent elevation to featuredom when the pictures were once solidly established in more than a hundred first-run theaters throughout the country had marked an epoch in a checkered life. Here in Birmingham Welford had been a great—if unpopular—social lion, and he shrank from the prospect of losing the job which made all of this possible. Nor was the

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loss of a highly sizable weekly pay envelope the least of his considerations. Yet Welford cringed at the mere thought of physical combat, even before the eye of the camera. He knew all too well that worthwhile fights are not screened without considerable damage to combatants: far more than the two-bit paying public realizes. And Opus was a large man——

“ ’Twoul’n’t be so bad,” he wailed, “if Opus didn’t have it in fo’ me, anyway.”

“Job or no job.”

Mr. Potts weakened. “I’ll fight.”

“Good.”

“No—it ain’t good: it’s rotten. Ise skeered——”

“Skeered ain’t gwine git you nowheres. Orifice Latimer is gwine be there hisse’f in person, an’ does you fight soft an’ easy, he’s gwine fire you immedjit. What you got to do is go into Opus like a tagger——”

“Yeh, but he ain’t gwine suspect that Ise a tagger——”

“ ’Splain it to him. Bust him one an’ give him a clue. Our whole pitcher depen’s on this fight. It’s got to be a humdinger.”

Actor Potts groaned loudly. “An’ Ise gwine be the pusson which gits humdinged.”

“But you’ll do it?”

“Yeh—I got to.”

Eventually Welford left, after repeating his decision to go through with the battle called for in the scenario. But after the little man had departed, J. Cæsar Clump stared long and thoughtfully at the door.

Mr. Clump was not at all satisfied. He was a believer in the doctrine that an equine can be conducted to water but cannot be made to quench a thirst which does not exist. And he understood quite clearly that Mr. Potts possessed an innate repugnance to physical combat.

It was a condition which did not please the dapper little director. Left to his own devices, he would have engaged a fire-eating double willy-nilly and let it go at that, using Welford only for the comedy close-ups. But the sudden development of presidential antipathy to Welford's temperament had made that impossible. And J. Cæsar was violently opposed to letting Mr. Potts leave the company.

There were several reasons for that: not the least of which was that Welford was an exceedingly good comedian—and Clump, as a practical picture man, knew that he could not be replaced without considerable difficulty. Too, Cæsar liked Welford Potts personally, in which he was sadly alone. At length the di-

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rector clenched his fists and battered the table——

"I got to *make* him put it over!" he muttered, "I just nachelly got to!"

But developments the following day did not augur well for J. Cæsar. For one thing Orifice R. Latimer waylaid the timid actor and conversed with him. Cæsar glimpsed the pair, scented trouble and joined them. Mr. Latimer wasted no time in explaining matters to Mr. Clump.

"I has just been tellin' him that ain't his fight with Opus Randall a good one, he writes his resignation immedjit."

Mr. Clump assumed a bluff and hearty tone. "Welford's all right, Mistuh Latimer. I talked to him last night an' got him so he was thirstin' fo' blood."

Out of the corner of his eye the director saw Welford cringe at the mention of gore. "I—I'll fight him all right—but they don't have to be no blood, does they?"

"Cain't he'p bein'," interjected the harsh president. "Once Opus lands on you——"

"Aw! lay offa that stuff, Mistuh Latimer. Ise gwine see that Welford gives him hell."

Orifice snorted. He turned away and beckoned Clump to follow. "You see," he sizzled triumphantly, "it ain't no use. What Welford

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has got is a heart like a chicken. There's two men he's skeered to death of an' bofe of 'em is Opus Randall."

"I tol' you he'd come across all right."

"Well, I hope you tol' me the troof, 'cause does Welford miss out, he shuah is gwine separate hisse'f fum a good job awful sudden an' permanent."

Further discussion between J. Cæsar Clump and Welford Potts elicited the information that Welford was desperate but doubtful. "Ise goin' th'oo with it, but nervousness is the one thing I ain't got nothin' else but."

"It means yo' job, Welford."

"I know it. Ise gwine do my best, but if I wilts it's just my hahd luck."

The man was obviously discouraged and his director sought to cheer him. "You just quit worryin', Brother Potts, an' count on me. Ise gwine fix things all right."

But J. Cæsar feared that he was boasting idly. It seemed that he had undertaken a task which savored of the physically impossible. Conscious belligerence was something of which Welford was simply not capable, and yet—"He's got to do it. My whole organization is gwine go flooie if he falls down now."

The day on the lot was not a signally happy one for J. Cæsar Clump. He watched Welford

## *Bigger and Blacker*

off the set and on—and grew heartsick at every fresh indication of that gentleman's undoubted histrionic ability. Worried as the little actor was, he yet succeeded with each scene in throwing off the depression which gripped him and of projecting himself into the slapstick comedy with such hilarious effect that even the hard-boiled cameraman laughed. "An' tha's the feller," mourned Clump, "that ol' Latimer craves to fire."

Orifice made it quite plain, too, that he intended to brook no procrastination. Before ending work for the night he walked on the set.

"To-morrow," he announced, "us takes the big scene where at Opus and Welford have their fight. I want all of the company heah early to git ready—'cause if that scene ain't no good, the pitcher is rotten. Good night, folks—sweet dreams." And with the "sweet dreams" his eyes focused upon the cowering figure of Welford Potts.

J. Cæsar Clump took his problem home with him. An element had entered into the situation which turned the director's soul to iron: Orifice Latimer had presumed to usurp certain powers which were inalienably the right of the director—Orifice had dared make it a personal issue between himself and Cæsar.



## *Inside Inflammation*

Therefore, if Mr. Clump was to retain the authority necessary to his continued success he must emerge victorious from this clash. Must—but how? “Ev’y plan I gits that is all right is all wrong,” moaned the harried director. “I wisht I was lyin’ six foots underground whiffin’ lilies.”

He dined in lone misery at Bud Peaglar’s Barbecue Lunch Room and Billiard Parlor, where he greeted his friends with curt and distant nods. Invitations for a sociable evening were coldly refused. Even Florian Slappey’s alluring suggestion that they spend a couple of hours shooting French pool at two bits a game was turned down.

“Somethin’s eatin’ on Cæsar,” proclaimed the superb Florian to certain friends, “an’ whatever it is has suttinly got an elegant appetite.”

From Bud Peaglar’s Cæsar returned to his pretentious two-room apartment, where he donned a flowered lounging robe and gave himself over to an orgy of thought. He conscripted every atom of brain power he possessed and set it to work, but the devious trails he followed proved to be mental culs de sac; each plan broke its neck against the brick wall of impossibility.

And then, just when it seemed that J. Cæsar

## *Bigger and Blacker*

Clump was doomed to disgraceful defeat—the great idea came to him. It came suddenly and full-panoplied and at first it left the director dazed and gasping.

“Hot dam!” he muttered, “if it on’y would work!”

If! It seemed too good to be true—yet the more he thought it over the more feasible it seemed. He paced the room nervously, viewing the proposed scheme from every angle, and as he thought the stern expression departed his colorado-maduro countenance and in its stead appeared the ghost of a smile which gradually expanded into a full-fledged grin and came into the world in the form of loud and triumphant laughter.

“I got it! I knowed mind was gwine triumph over matter—an’ the bigger the mind—which is mine—the less it matters. Brother Welford Potts—you is gwine git saved in spite of yo’s’e’f, an’ I is the man which saves you.”

He changed feverishly from lounging robe to sack suit. He trotted downtown to the office of a doctor friend in the Penny Prudential Bank Building on Eighteenth Street. Fortunately, the gentleman of medicine was in. To him Cæsar outlined his scheme and at his recital the M.D. began to chuckle. He gave the scheme his unqualified endorsement and then

requested permission to attend the hostilities the following day. When Cæsar rose the doctor extended his hand.

"Mr. Clump—I am proud to have talked with you. Brains are the most things you possess in your head."

From the doctor's office, Cæsar made his way to the corner drug store. His purchase there was very simple—and quite interesting. He bought fifteen cents' worth of volatile oil of mustard and he chuckled as he left the store with the innocent-looking vial.

His next objective was the studio of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc.—an old, abandoned warehouse which had taken a new lease on life. The night watchman knew Cæsar and greeted him respectfully. "Workin' late to-night, ain't you, Mistuh Clump?"

"You sho' expostulated somethin' that time, my man. Ise wukkin' late an' Ise workin' impawtant."

He entered the dark and cavernous recesses. He pressed a button and the lights flashed on, disclosing a scene of wild disorder: new sets and old sets; sets in process of construction and sets in process of being demolished: Kleigs and Cooper-Hewitts; wires squirming across the floor like great black snakes; lumber, furniture, what not. But the disorder—organized disorder—

## *Bigger and Blacker*

der—held little interest for J. Cæsar Clump at that moment. He picked his way across the cluttered space and paused before a dressing-room door. Inscribed on this door was the name of Welford Potts and immediately above that name was blazoned a large star.

A skeleton key gave access to the director. He closed the door carefully and snapped on the lights. Then he worked with swift and efficient purposefulness.

From a hook he removed a weird-looking garment of wool. It was quite lengthy and uncompromisingly black. Cæsar held it at arm's-length and gazed upon it with sincere affection.

“Ideas which I has got! Wrastler’s trunks.”

Wrestler’s trunks they were: one solid piece of material calculated to fit the stellar form of Mr. Welford Potts from wrists to toes. “What goes in heah,” mused Cæsar beatifically, “ain’t nobody gwine see.”

The task of turning the trunks inside out was a trifle more complicated than at first appeared. But eventually it was accomplished; whereupon Cæsar took the first step in the execution of a Machiavellian scheme which was calculated to make Welford’s job safe for Welford.

Giving careful heed to the expert medical advice recently received, Cæsar placed on the

inside of the woolen wrestling suit a score or so of drops of oil of mustard. The points at which these drops of fire were placed were selected scrupulously; each was a strategic position and the effect was calculated to fill Welford with enormous enthusiasm when the Potts-Randall fight should start the following day before the all-seeing and merciless eye of the camera.

J. Cæsar did an artistic bit of work, and when the oil of mustard was duly distributed he swung the trunks about his head until quite certain that the drug was thoroughly dry. Then he turned the tights right side out again, hung them back on the wall and inspected closely. There was, in truth, a faint aroma which had not been there before, but J. Cæsar was quite certain that this would not be noticed by the unsuspecting Mr. Potts.

“By to-morrow it’s gwine be dry tho’ough— an’ when Opus commences th’owin’ Welford aroun’ an’ Welford begins to perspire—then ol’ Mistuh Oil of Mustard is gwine take the directin’ right out of my hands.”

All the way back to his apartment Mr. J. Cæsar Clump was chortling with unholy glee. He was positive that the oil of mustard, so cunningly placed on the interior of Welford’s wrestling costume, would impart to that gen-

## *Bigger and Blacker*

tleman an unnatural eagerness for combat—and while Cæsar confessed to himself that the measures pursued were rather drastic, there was no slightest doubt in his mind that the end justified the means. After all, it was a poor director indeed who would throw up his hands and confess himself beaten when the president desired to discharge his most valuable male star.

The following morning J. Cæsar was on the lot early. There Welford Potts found him. Upon the countenance of Mr. Potts was a lugubriosity which made the surrounding atmosphere soggy with gloom.

“I ain’t gwine make a good fight of it, Cæsar. Ise skeered.”

“Shuh! boy! You ain’t got nothin’ to be skeered about.”

“Yes, I has. Orifice Latimer is a’ready heah an’ he has done tol’ me that di’n’t I fight Opus hahd, my job was gwine be ain’t.”

“Words what he talks with his mouf. You just stick around, Welford—I’ll look after you.”

“You mean that, Cæsar?”

“Suttinly do. I promises you faithful that I’ll handle things so as Orifice Latimer will be salisfried.”

“What you gwine do?”

## *Inside Inflammation*

"Nemmin' what Ise gwine do. Is you willin' to trust me?"

"I shuah is, Cæsar. You is a fine friend fo' a feller to have."

"Boy! You said it."

Welford turned away. "I'll git dressed in them wrastlin' trunks."

"No. Stick around with me. Gettin' dressed now might put ideas into somebody's haid. You just hang aroun' until I say fo' you to git into those coschume: understan'?"

"I does. I ain't cravin' to git into them graveyard clothes no sooner than I has to."

Cæsar sought Orifice Latimer. "Mistuh Latimer—ev'ything's chicken."

"Says which?"

"I got it all fixed. Ise plump glad you is heah, so you can see fo' yo'se'f how much injustice you has done po' Welford Potts."

"Huh! Nothin' ain't injustice to that po' jellyfish."

"You is a good president, Orifice—but you ain't no judge of men. You just watch Welford——"

"You bet I will."

"On'y one thing worryin' me: s'pose Welford beats Opus Randall up so bad Opus cain't work next week?"



## *Bigger and Blacker*

Orifice flushed. "What you tryin' to do, Little Man—kid me?"

"Never would try to kid you, Brother Latimer. Ise se'ious."

"You is crazy."

"All right, le's see." He glimpsed a ponderous figure waddling across the lot, encased in a moth-eaten bath-robe. Immediately the shrill voice rang out. "Opus!"

Welford's co-star turned and grinned. Cæsar beckoned, and Opus came.

"Mawnin', Mistuh Latimer. Mawnin', Cæsar."

"Mawnin', Opus. You all dressed?"

Mr. Randall flung back his dressing gown, disclosing a huge, paunchy figure clad in wrestling trunks of ocher shade. Cæsar put hands over eyes——

"Great 'Wiggilin' Tripe! You looks like an accident goin' somewhere to happen."

"I is," murmured Opus confidentially. "Fo' six months, Cæsar, I has been lookin' fo' a chance to git even with that uppity Welford Potts—an' to-day is my day."

"What you mean?"

"President Latimer tol' me he wanted this fight between I an' Welford to look reelistic—an' Ise shuah gwine give him what he craves."

Inwardly, Cæsar chuckled. "Tha's just

what I has called you over fo', Opus. I know you an' Welford don't love each other none—an' Ise puffedly willing you should beat him up—'specially as it'll make a swell pitcher fo' us. But just one thing I requests—don't go too hahd on him at fust. Staht off slow until Welford gits a chance to git warmed up—then go as strong as you like."

"Sweet orders which you issues!"

"An' another thing, Opus—you take good care that Welford don't git away. Seein' as you-all will be wrastlin', it'll be easy enough to hol' him tight. Mos' likely he'll want to git loose an' run——"

"He won't never git loose fum me. I'll hold him with one hand and wallop him with t'other."

"Tha's talkin'. Give him hell."

"Hell's cool to what he gits."

Cæsar turned smilingly to the president as Opus waddled importantly away.

"You see, Orifice—I has suttinly fixed things."

Mr. Latimer turned a puzzled eye upon his director. "Does Welford know how thoughtful you is takin' care of him?"

"We-e-ell, not ezac'ly, but——"

"Yeh! An' when he finds out he's gwine run away an' then——"

## *Bigger and Blacker*

"Trouble with you, Mistuh Latimer: you ain't got no confidence in me."

"You ain't doin' the fightin'. An' if this scene ain't good an' rough, Mistuh Welford Potts ain't gwine have no mo' job than a worm."

J. Cæsar Clump smiled an enigmatic smile. "You watch," he counseled cryptically.

Mr. Orifice R. Latimer had absolutely no intention of doing anything else. He hovered around the set like a buzzard near a prospective meal. There was a voracious light in his eyes and in conversation with Opus Randall he amplified the instructions of the director anent the degree of mayhem which should be committed upon the terrified and unsuspecting Welford Potts.

As for that gentleman, he gloomed about in his dressing room, clad only in his misery. J. Cæsar Clump was with him—"Kinder chap-eronin' you into yo' clothes, Welford."

"Oh, Lawsy——"

"Don't you go to frettin'. Ise fixed things."

"But——"

"No buts. Ev'rything's ready. Just you climb into them tights an' come with me. Might as well git it over with."

"You talk like I was gwine be hung."

Eventually they came to the set: an impro-

vised amphitheater. Within the eye of the camera were grouped all members of the organization plus certain extras who offered their services gratis. In the foreground was the buxom lady who was cast in the rôle of picture heroine. Opposite her was the camera and near the camera stood Orifice Latimer. He hungrily eyed the sadly deficient figure of the approaching Welford.

Welford sensed that the crowd was not unlike the gatherings of old Rome when the gladiators came forth to do battle. There was a tenseness on the set—a subtle feeling that something genuinely dramatic was about to happen. This was an idea which the director deliberately had fostered. The tense expectancy of the dark faces was not simulated; it was startlingly real. No question that the scene would be a success. If——

Thus far there was no hint that the volatile oil of mustard had commenced to function—which was just what Cæsar desired. “When that cullud boy gits to perspirin’——”

He tarried not; neither did he hesitate. He summoned to the ring the contracting principles in the wrestling match. He was a bundle of nerves—barking orders here and there: coaching the extras in the parts they were to

## *Bigger and Blacker*

play, explaining to the lady star the degree of interest she should register.

"This stahts as a wrastlin' match fo' the lady's hand an' money," he told them. "An' you bofe loves her so much that you craves to 'sterminate each other. Is that plain?"

"I'll say it is!" Opus Randall seemed to comprehend clearly.

"N-n-n-n-not really 'sterminate," hazarded Welford fearfully.

"Co'se not," reassured Cæsar. "Just make it look good."

He walked with Opus to that gentleman's corner. "Don't you let him git away, Opus."

"Not a chance."

"A'right. Ev'ybody set?"

A general nod. A final quiver of terror from Welford Potts. Then the voice of the director crackled through his megaphone.

"Ready! Action! Cam'ra!"

The combatants came to the center of the ring. Welford put out a gentle, tentative hand. Opus grabbed it and clinched. Welford's eyes rolled. "Not so hahd, Opus."

"I ain't gwine hurt you. C'mon: le's us git warmed up."

Welford's puny figure was locked in Opus's embrace. Came the directing voice of J. Cæsar Clump.

"Tha's good. Tha's fine. Now wrastle around a bit, you fellers. Le's git a perspiration up."

Thus far the scene was far from satisfactory and Orifice R. Latimer was peeved. His basso profundo beat upon Welford's ears.

"Little mo' action there, Brother Potts!"

Welford tried his pitiful best to oblige. His slender figure wriggled and squirmed. He panted and struggled—and Opus stayed with him. J. Cæsar Clump leaned forward interestedly; he saw tiny beads of perspiration on the little man's forehead.

Welford was doing his best—when suddenly a ball of living fire touched his right thigh. He wriggled fiercely. "Hey! Lemme loose—O-o-ouch!"

Cæsar howled enthusiastically. "Tha's it, Brother Potts. Now you is fightin'. Hold him, Opus."

The eyes of Mr. Welford Potts popped wide open. The terrific burning of his thigh was no longer only on his thigh. He was stabbed in the back by a jet of flame; another pierced the calf of his left leg; still another crawled over his tummy.

"Hey! Leave me go, Opus! Leave go of me!"

## *Bigger and Blacker*

And Cæsar shouted orders. "Stick with him, Big Boy."

The Big Boy stuck. He grabbed Welford more tightly than ever.

But now stark terror had gripped Mr. Welford Potts. The oil of mustard was functioning at top speed, and Welford felt the urge for sudden departure. Poor Welford didn't know exactly what was happening, but he did know that he desired it to cease.

He fought and kicked and tore. Opus clung tighter and tighter. Desperation gripped Welford. He gathered the idea that his agony was directly due to his opponent—wherefore Mr. Welford inaugurated a battle for freedom.

And Welford was good. He doubled his puny fists and battered them upon Opus's amazed countenance. His voice pealed forth in wild and eerie shrieks which punctured the atmosphere and set the spectators dizzy with enthusiasm.

Then Opus Randall got mad. No longer did he require the hysterical advice of his director to make it look realistic: Welford Potts adequately had taken care of that.

There started on the stage an epic battle. Opus manhandled Welford but Welford didn't seem to mind. As a matter of fact, Mr. Randall's most stalwart attack was as nothing be-



side the effectiveness of the few drops of oil of mustard with which the interior of his wrestling trunks had been flavored.

"Lemme go!" howled Welford. "Lemme go or I'll——"

Wham! His right landed on Opus's nose. That organ protested redly.

"Bust me on the nose, will you?" Mr. Randall was fighting in scarlet earnest. "Take that! An' that!—Hey! Quit chewin' my ear!"

For several moments Orifice R. Latimer stared pop-eyed at the shambles. Then he dropped a respectful hand on Cæsar's shoulder. "Boy!" he murmured apologetically, "they suttinly is fightin'."

"Shuh! They ain't even started yet. Just stick aroun' awhile." Then, loudly, "Hold him, Opus."

Opus was holding. But he was holding now for self-protection. Mr. Randall was frightened. Every time he released hand or foot of Welford, the temporarily emancipated member came to painful rest upon some vulnerable portion of Mr. Randall's protuberant anatomy. It never occurred to Opus that Welford craved flight; he fancied that their personal grudge was being settled then and there by a suddenly berserk man who was thirsting for gore.

"Leave go of me; you big, fat—O-o-ooow!"

## *Bigger and Blacker*

The spectators howled and raved. Amaze-ment and delight shared equally in their ex-pressions. The calm, critical eye of the camera missed no detail. The men on the platform pitched about, locked in a grasp which Opus feared to loose.

And finally Opus's voice came pitifully from the mêlée.

"Hey, Cæsar: make him quit beatin' me up. Ise all in——"

"Hop to it, Welford! Attaboy!" No sym-athy from the director.

Around and around they lurched. The phys-ical strength of each was well-nigh exhausted. They were breathing with difficulty, and their heads rolled about on their necks. Welford was suffused with fire; all he knew was that he was burning up. He was scarcely conscious that Opus was swatting him.

And then——

"Cut!" Cæsar's voice boomed through the studio. He and Orifice leaped forward and separated the combatants.

For an instant Welford Potts stood teeter-ing on the balls of his feet. Then he saw an opening in the warehouse door and through it he vanished like an ebony meteor.

J. Cæsar Clump turned in grinning triumph to President Latimer.

## *Inside Inflammation*

"I guess you fires Welford now, eh?"

Orifice was graceful in defeat. "I was all wrong, Cæsar. Mistuh Potts is a wonder which has a job with us as long as he wants. Sufferin' Sidemeat! How that boy can fight! To-morrow mawnin' I apologizes to him personal."

Cæsar left the studio. He mounted his flivver which was parked at the curb and started for the boarding house of Mr. Welford Potts. He overhauled that gentleman halfway. Welford was zigzagging down the street—slightly worse than all in. Cæsar bundled him into the car and took him to his own apartment. There, by main force, he stripped the pungent garments from the stricken wrestler and anointed the burning body with cold cream and lard which had been stocked against this emergency.

And at length Welford Potts received some surcease from his pain. He sat up on the edge of the bed and turned puffed and inquisitive eyes upon his director.

"Well," congratulated J. Cæsar, "I fixed things fo' you, didn't I?"

"Says which?"

"I fixed things."

"What you mean: fixed things?"

Briefly J. Cæsar explained. For an instant

## *Bigger and Blacker*

the light of murder flared in Welford's eyes—then died. After all, as Cæsar explained, what was done was done; the ordeal was over. "Orifice Latimer is gwine 'pologize to you in pusson to-morrow. An' instid of gittin' fired, you has got a job with us fo' life. I hated to do you thataway, Welford—but it was plumb nessary. An' I'll han' you one thing, boy—you shuah fit noble."

Slowly Welford Potts straightened his slender figure. A new and vast dignity settled upon him.

"Yeh," he agreed, "I guess I did." Then he finished magnanimously, "An' Opus done pretty good himse'f."

An hour later Welford swaggered down to Eighteenth Street with his friend and director. Welford was not at all averse to the plaudits which he knew would be showered upon him and he was eager to display the new pride which had resulted from his he-man exploit. To have whipped a man ninety pounds heavier——

They paused in front of a hot-dog stand. "Le's eat," suggested the director, and Welford agreed.

They posed at the counter. J. Cæsar Clump gave the order:

"Two hot dogs."

## *Inside Inflammation*

The man behind the counter inserted two succulent weiners in a pair of crisp rolls.

Then an idea came to Mr. Welford Potts. He leaned across the counter and spoke with intense feeling. Said Mr. Potts to the hot-dog man:

“Don’t put no mustard on mine!”



## *VI. Miss Directed*

Orifice R. Latimer, ponderous president of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., smiled serenely as he massaged the palms of his pudgy hands.

"Director Clump," he said to the dynamic little man opposite, "us has got the world by the tail on a downhill pull."

Cæsar did not answer immediately. "We-e-ell," he admitted at length, "it does sort of look thataway."

An expression of supreme irritation crossed the presidential countenance. "Bad mouf what you puts on things, Cæsar. Tell me one mo' thing which could be gooder than what it is."

"There ain't none. Tha's what makes me auspicious. You see, President, things ain't been breakin' right——"

"What's that you says with yo' mouf?"

"They ain't been breakin' right. Yestiddy I walked right plumb under a ladder an' las' night a couple black cats tripped over my foots. Now I ain't superstitious or nothin' like that, but when happenings is all good an' signs is all bad——"

"Fumadiddles!" Latimer snorted his dis-



## *Bigger and Blacker*

gust: "I reckon was you residin' in heaven playin' a gol' harp an' eatin' ambrosium you'd be worryin' 'cause you didn't have no raincoat in case a thunderstorm come up. What you ain't got in yo' haid is no brains, an'——"

There was a tap on the door which opened immediately thereafter to admit a slender, light-brown young lady.

"Somebody to see Director Clump," announced President Latimer's secretary.

"Name which?"

"She woul'n't give her name. Says to tell you she craves to see you—an' see you quick."

The door closed gently. Clump looked at Latimer and Latimer looked at Clump. The director's expression was an admixture of fear and triumph.

"I—I got a hunch," he proclaimed anxiously.

Latimer spoke in sepulchral tones. "J. Cæsar," he inquired, "you ain't gone an' gotten yo'se'f involved with no woman, has you?"

"Uh-huh."

"Oh, Lawsy—— Since when?"

"Six yeahs ago," came the unhappy confession. "An' I is scared this is her."

"Y-you reckon she aims to make trouble?"

"I don't reckon nothin' about it. I knows. An' her aim is awful good." He paced the office, hands clasped earnestly behind his back,

brow furrowed with horizontal lines of worry. "Now why coul'n't she stay up in Louisville, anyway? What brung her down heah to mess up my work? Dawg-gone it."

"You know who she is, Cæsar?"

"Bets a dollar to a thin dime I does."

Latimer leaned forward earnestly. "Who?"

The director's voice crackled across the room. "Who you reckon?" he snapped. "Unless I is all wrong this lady's name is Mrs. J. Cæsar Clump!"

In substantiation of his dire prophecy the door was flung violently open and Mrs. Clump burst into the room. For an instant she stood regarding the two men, then flung herself violently into the arms of her mate.

"Cæsar!"

"Sicily!"

Latimer eyed the tableau reflectively—and not without some approval. Sicily Clump was not at all hard on the optics. She was small and slender and garbed in the latest and most prominent fashion. Her coatee was of squirrel and her pumps of blonde satin. She wore a pert little toque of some gleaming material and her naturally fine complexion was made more so by a liberal and artistic application of lavender-brown complexion powder.

Latimer's first thought was that Clump was

## *Bigger and Blacker*

a gentleman of underkeen perception in rebelling against the arrival of such a pulchritudinous wife. Nor did her outburst after being introduced to him cause any amendment of his opinion.

"Orifice R. Latimer! Well, I do declare. Isn't it wonderful shakin' han's with a real president—an' just like any other man, too. Mistuh Latimer, I suttinly does crave to congratulate you on how much success you has gotten with this heah pitcher company, an' I is so proud to know my husban' is wukkin' with such a genius. He never used to be wuth so much——"

"Now listen, Sicily——"

"Well, you wasn't an' you know it: always jumpin' fum one job to another, an' never stickin' no place long enough to git nowhere."

"I guess I always looked after you pretty good."

"Guess you did don't mean nothin'. Reckon there's many a time us wouldn't of et if I hadn't been a swell actress which could play the Chicago cabarets any time I wanted——"

Orifice R. Latimer, vastly impressed, leaned forward. "You is an actress, Mrs. Clump?"

"You suttinly expressed it right, Big Boy. Actin' is the fondest thing I is of. Which is how come I to visit Bumminham."

"You ain't stayin' long is you, honey?" There appeared to be a vast anxiety in the husbandly query.

"Not so very. Couple yeahs mebbe."

"Oh, Gosh!"

"Now listen at me, Cæsar—if you ain't glad——"

"Co'se I is glad, Sicily. But I guess I got a right to 'Oh Gosh' if I want to." He threw an unhappy glance at his president. "What I told you 'bout them cats an' that ladder, huh?"

Mr. Latimer emitted a loud chuckle. "Reckon you got yo' signs all mixed up. A swell-lookin' gal like Mrs. Clump is always welcome aroun' heah——"

"Boy! You shuah do greet trouble."

"—An' I want you to understand, Mrs. Clump, that any time——"

"Oh! tha's all right, Mistuh Latimer. I plans to stick around the studjo a good deal an' sort of he'p you out. 'Smatter of fac' I think one thing which is wrong with yo' pitchers is that you needs a good leadin' woman."

Premonition smote J. Cæsar Clump, but the president blundered heavily.

"Reckon you ain't so far wrong at that, Mrs. Clump. Us has got two swell gemmun stars an' a fine juvenile, but we is kind of weak on wimmin."

## *Bigger and Blacker*

Sicily beamed. "Also," she vouchsafed, "yo' technic ain't so swell."

"Ain't it?" Latimer was rather at sea. "I guess you ought to know, bein' an actress yo'se'f. An' now, Mrs. Clump, Ise sort of busy, so I sugges's that you make yo'se'f at home on the lot, an' sort of browse aroun' an' see what's what. An' any time you sees how things can be improved an' craves to git suggestive, just come aroun'."

Mrs. Clump agreed and departed blithely for a tour of the lot. Director Clump collapsed weakly in a chair and passed a perspiring hand across an aching forehead.

"Chief," he announced, "you has suttinly started somethin' you cain't stop."

Latimer grinned. "You says words, Cæsar, but they don't mean nothin'. Yo' wife is gwine prove a very vallible adjunk to the Midnight organization, which we needs as many of 'em as we can git."

"An' when you got her, you shuah got a dozen. Time that woman finishes tellin' you how wrong you is, an' how right you would be if you was diff'ent, you is gwine be applying pussonal fo' admission to the lunatic asylum."

"Shuh! You takes her too se'ious."

"So would you if you'd been ma'ied to her fo' six yeahs."

Cæsar staggered miserably out after his wife. He found that already she had taken Latimer's invitation far too literally. She was making herself at home and doing it with a vengeance. At the particular moment that J. Cæsar came upon her she was introducing herself to Opus Randall and explaining to that portly and ordinarily genial comedian his manifold shortcomings. He was staring at her in dumbfounded amazement.

"Y-y-yassum: but how come you to know so much?"

"I is a professional my own se'f, an' I reckon I knows somethin'."

"Yassum—but what?"

"I know that you ain't much of an actor, Mistuh Randall. You screens rotten an' always you jumps aroun' too much an' makes too many monkey faces."

"S'pose," suggested Opus coldly—"s'pose you tells yo' husban' that. It's him which direc's me."

That was the beginning. Before the day's labor was done, the workers on the Midnight lot knew that something was certain to happen. It wasn't that Mrs. Clump was lacking in personality, but rather that she considered it incumbent upon her to impress all and sundry with her importance and ability.

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Nor did she shirk the self-imposed task. Her comment was caustic—and no less so because she was usually more than half right. It was her manner which aroused the bitter hostility of those with whom she came in contact. From their first meeting, Opus Randall despised her—and after a single session with Welford Potts, Mr. Randall's co-star, that gentleman found himself allied for once with the portly sharer of his stellar glories.

Their first evening together J. Cæsar repressed a desire to express himself pointedly. But he did skirt the subject which was frightening him.

"Honey-gal," he said, "you shuah seemed to make a hit with President Latimer to-day."

She dimpled attractively. "I reckon he knows a good-lookin' gal when he sees one."

"He suttinly do. But of co'se you understan' that he was mos'ly bein' sweet to you 'cause you is my wife."

"Meanin' what, Li'l' Man?"

"Meanin' that you hadn't ought to take what he said too litterly."

"'Bout which?"

"'Bout you hangin' 'roun' the lot all the time. Us is a busy crowd down yonder, an' I reckon there ain't nobody cravin' to have a stranger



aroun' all the time. Even out in Hollywood they don't 'low nothin' like that."

"Bumminham ain't Hollywood, an' I reckon if Mistuh Latimer don't yearn to have me on the lot, he can say so his own se'f."

J. Cæsar Clump became silent while the silencing was yet good. But two nights later, when he himself had sensed the electric unrest on the lot, he approached the rather delicate situation from a different angle.

"Like Bumminham, honey?"

"Crazy 'bout it."

"It ain't no big town like you has been used to."

"But it's homey an' friendly. I 'mounts to somethin' heah."

"I'll say you does. As my wife——"

"Nossuh. I 'mounts to somethin' as myse'f—an' Ise gwine become a heap mo' impawtant. Folks down to the studjo is just commencin' to understan' how good I'm doin' 'em, an——"

"Yeh, but sugarfoot, you hadn't ought to be buttin' in all the time. We was gittin' along pretty fair befo' you come."

"Shuah you was. But you is gwine git along a heap better fum now hencefor'd."

The days which followed indicated one thing clearly: whatever Sicily may have lacked in tact she more than atoned for in willingness.

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She circulated around the Midnight lot with all the industry of a wasp at a picnic—and with about as great popularity. Her tongue never ceased functioning and its sting became more venomous.

The immediate effect of her interest in the efforts of all members of the organization was to spread dissatisfaction where before only peace and tranquillity had existed. Before her advent the organization had been doing double duty, thanks to the fraternal feeling which pervaded the lot; but now all that was changed. There was an air of suppressed—but bitter—resentment—and it was directed against Director J. Cæsar Clump.

And therein lay the real injury.

J. Cæsar Clump was the one really indispensable person on the payroll of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. Starting out with the company when it possessed nothing and owed twice as much, he had caused dividends to grow on barren soil. He knew his trade, was a natural showman and had a genius for comedy hokum. And he was an indefatigable worker and a stickler for detail.

The mainspring of this success was J. Cæsar Clump. His was the power absolute; members of the company looked up to him in worship-

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ful awe. At least they had until Sicily Clump arrived.

The company resented Sicily and blamed her on Cæsar. Certainly her airs and highfalutin' manners were directly attributable to the fact that she happened to be related to Mr. Clump by marriage. They resented her insistent intrusion and constant criticism—and realized that there was strictly nothing they could do about it. Whereupon they carried their grouches about, and permitted them to flourish even as the well-known green bay tree.

Cæsar was not blind. He watched bitterly the trend of events, saw his smooth-working machinery become rusty and creaky and inefficient. For the first time in months he found himself working against time—pushing production against the threat of imminent delivery date.

His problem was delicate and fraught with the potentialities of dire trouble. He wanted to assemble the company and inform each member that he understood and sympathized. But that, in view of his husbandhood, was patently impossible. Therefore he mooned about the lot and did not even know that vitriol dripped from his tongue and irascibility marked his working hours.

As for President Orifice R. Latimer, that

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gentleman was slow to awaken. He suspected a thing or two, but it was not until Messrs. Opus Randall and Welford Potts came to him as co-chairmen of a Committee of Indignation that he really knew what he was up against. He listened wide-eyed to their declaration of dissatisfaction and his round head wobbled slowly about on the thick neck.

"Boys—what you tells me suttinly is some-thin'."

"It's a dawg-gone sight mo'n that, Brother Latimer. Us cain't wuk a tall with that woman snoopin' aroun' all the time. You'd think fum the way she acts she was all of us wives."

"Hmm!" Latimer gave the matter careful thought. "Reckon the bes' thing is fo' you-all not to pay no attention to her."

"Tha's swell advice." Mr. Potts waxed sarcastic. "Next time you sits down on the business end of a yaller jacket don't you pay no 'tention to what happens."

"Them ain't the same. An' besides, I don't see what I can do."

Their answer came in chorus. "Run her off the lot."

"No-o. That cain't be done. She's Cæsar's wife—an' if he once got good an' sore at us——"

"Shuh—he ain't gwine git sore if you gits

that woman off the lot. He's 'most as crazy as we are."

"Is you shuah?"

"No, I ain't shuah. Ise certain."

Latimer dismissed them and summoned Mr. Clump. That gentleman staggered into the room; haggard of face and tired of eye. He slumped into a chair and puffed indifferently upon his cigarette which drooped disconsolately from the corner of his lips.

"Cæsar," queried Latimer diplomatically, "how is Mrs. Clump gittin' along?"

Mr. Clump grimaced with distaste. "Plenty," he answered grimly.

"Kind of interferin' with yo' work?"

"No—she ain't interferin' with it. She's just busted it plumb to Hades."

"Tchk! Tha's too bad. I has kind of been suspectin' such, an' I wants to suggest, Cæsar, that you informs her that hereafter all we crave of her presence is her absence."

Cæsar smiled hopelessly. "Me tell her to git off the lot?"

"Uh-huh."

"Big Boy—you utters words but they don't tell nobody nothin'. Me tellin' Sicily to do somethin' woul'n't be nothin' but th'owin' good breff after bad. An' besides, I ain't got nothin' to do with this. It was you which ast her to

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hang aroun' in the fust place—an' is she run away fum heah, you has got to do it yo' own se'f. There ain't nothin' I can do, an' I intends to do it consistent."

"But, Cæsar——"

"Don't go buttin' me, Orifice. My troubles is wuss than your'n."

Latimer was sincerely perturbed. "Things is gittin' pretty bad, Brother Clump."

"They ain't never so bad they cain't git wuss."

"What is us gwine do about it?"

"*Us* ain't gwine do nothin'. Anything which is done, *you* does."

"I cain't do nothin'. Tell you what, Cæsar—you think things over an' keep yo' eyes peeled. An' lemme know what comes up."

Cæsar promised. And that night something came up.

Mr. Clump grew suspicious at dinner when his spouse appeared bearing a platter of succulent spareribs which he adored and she despised. "Cooked 'em my own se'f, honey-boy," she announced. Then came fresh, crumbly biscuits; hearts of celery, Carolina rice cooked so that each grain stood alone and independent; rich, tasty gravy and—last and most important—a lemon meringue pie baked by the wifely hand.

Cæsar's suspicion detracted from his gustatory enjoyment. Something was impending: this was a too obvious effort to humor him.

The explanation arrived in due course after the dinner had been satisfactorily absorbed and they were seated in the tiny living room with Cæsar puffing a long, black cigar.

"Honeybee," murmured Sicily tentatively, "Ise kind of discontented heah in Bummin-ham."

Cæsar raised his eyes hopefully. "Golly—I should think you would be. You ought to go to New Yawk or Chicago or somewheres, an'——"

"'Tain't that. I don't never expect to leave you again. I is just discontented doin' nothin'——"

"But Sicily—you ain't been doin' nothin'—Gawd knows you ain't."

"Just advisin'. That ain't nothin'. Now, it's like I told Mistuh Latimer that fust day I met up with him—what you-all need is a good woman star."

Mr. Clump groaned. The worst was happening.

"Yep—a good woman star. An' I has decided to he'p you out."

"Oh, Lawsy—you is gwine do a heap of helpin'." He rose and paced the room. "You



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mean you wants a job playin' in Midnight pitchers?"

"Yeh."

"Nothin' stirrin'." He spoke with grim authority.

For a moment she said nothing. Then she rose to the full of her delicate five-two and posed belligerently before him.

"So you says I cain't work with you, eh? You po' li'l' knock-kneed, pigeon-toed, sawed-off shrimp! Who is you, anyway? I reckon you is gwine say I cain't act—is that it?"

He put up a defensive hand. "You can act all right. But Sicily, you don't belong in no movin'-pitcher business. "Specially where I is directin'."

"Yah—jealous of me, ain't you? You been lordin' it aroun' that lot fo' so long you don't want nobody there which knows mo'n you do. Well, Ise tellin' you this, Half-Bake, an' Ise tellin' you positive: You gits me a job actin' in Midnight pitchers or you sho'ly is gwine heah somethin' about why not—an' heah it frequent. Tha's all!"

Cæsar shook his head slowly. "It's aplenty, Sicily—believe me, it is."

There was little sleep that night for Mr. J. Cæsar Clump, director extraordinary. He knew only too well what he faced should his

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wife's ultimatum be ignored. And so that afternoon he laid the facts before Orifice Latimer. That gentleman, acutely sorry for his director and fully appreciating the delicacy of his position—promised relief.

"I gits all the prominent gemmun on the lot assembled in solemn concave," said he. "An' we discusses what to do."

"Good." Cæsar moved to the door. "But you got to count me out. I ain't gwine have nothin' to do with anything you decides."

A council of war was called: Welford Potts and Opus Randall and Florian Slappey and Lawyer Evans Chew, along with several persons of lesser importance. They gave attentive ear to Latimer's outline of misery.

"It's thisaway," finished the chief executive. "I know us can tell Sicily Clump to remain offen the lot, but does we do so, she gives Cæsar merry hell at home an' then he starts doin' rotten work fo' us an' we goes flooie. We has got to consider this proposition fum all angles an' decide which is best if any. I is now open to suggestions."

But suggestions were slow in coming, and such ones were so obviously impossible as to be discarded almost without consideration.

There was a distinct absence of levity in the group. They concentrated upon the problem

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with headachy intensity—for each of them realized that, thanks to the pulchritudinous Sicily, Midnight was facing a crisis at the very time when a crisis was least welcome.

And then—just when it seemed that there was nothing to be done and they had decided unanimously to do it—an elegant, dapper figure rose and addressed Latimer.

“Mistuh President.”

“Mistuh Slappey.”

“I has got an idea—a swell idea.”

“Glory be!”

“I has been thinkin’ frequent an’ sayin’ little, ever since us got together. Now it seems to me that we has decided on one thing: Mrs. Clump has got to be happy else Cæsar is gwine be mis’able. An’ is Cæsar mis’able, us faces financial difficulties: ain’t that so?”

“Shuah is, Brother Slappey.”

“Now I asks you: What is gwine make Sicily happy?”

“Nothin’. Not that gal.”

“Oh, yes, there is! There’s one thing which will tickle her to deff. An’ that, my brethren, is starrin’ in a Midnight pitcher!”

He paused dramatically and smiled in triumph at the bewilderment reflected on the faces of his cohorts. Latimer snorted disgustedly.

“Foolishment which you talks!”

“ ’Tain’t foolishment. Us goes to Sicily an’ says we think she would make a swell star, but we got to be shuah. So we hiahs her fo’ one pitcher—just *one*! An’ if she make good in that, she gits a contrac’. But if she don’t——”

They were interested, and Florian continued enthusiastically:

“This gal ain’t never played no pitchers, specially comedies like us makes. So she says ‘Yes’ right away—an’ we turns her loose. An’ Oh, Sweet Mama! how loose we turns her. Follow me?”

“Ise ahead of you,” breathed Latimer admiringly. “Preceed.”

“You writes the scenario, Brother Latimer—an’ it’s got to be scenario aplenty. It’s fo’ a heroine leadin’ lady an’ what happens to her in that story is a sin an’ a shame. An’ what happens is that she prob’ly gits disgustful an’ quits or else the pitcher is so rotten that when we gives it a preview down to the Champeen Theater ev’ybody razzes her an’ she gits unhappy an’ returns back Nawth where she comes fum—or else even if she stays in Bumminham she hates Midnight so fo’ makin’ her ridiculum that we don’t never see her no mo’.”

A tense silence filled the room. Latimer advanced a single objection.

“That’d cos’ a heap of money, Florian.”

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"Not so much as gòin' bust or gittin' behime schedule, would it?"

"No-o." The president wagged his head. "You reckon Cæsar would be willin' to make his wife do them terrible things?"

"Nope. He shuah woul'n't—not if you writes into that scenario all the things Ise got in mind. An' that's the bes' part of my scheme. We esplains to Sicily that there ain't no use of her makin' no pitcher with her husban' directin', so we gits her an extra special director of her ve'y own."

"Yeh—go on."

"An' we does."

"But, Brother Slappey, we ain't got no other director besides J. Cæsar."

"Yes, we has."

"Name' which?"

Florian grinned broadly. "Eddie Fizz!"

There was an instant of silence—then a deep-throated guffaw emerged from the presidential throat.

"Hot ziggity dam! If you ain't the think-in'est man! We gives her a rotten scenario an' a rotten poor poached egg like Eddie Fizz to direc' the pitcher. Boy! that suttinly is gwine be the mos' rottenest pitcher which was ever scrun."

The meeting wound up in a blaze of con-

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gratulation and general hilarity. By dint of great effort they managed to keep their faces straight when Eddie Fizz was summoned.

Mr. Fizz was not unduly easy on the eyes. He was small and somewhat lopsided and he had a habit of blinking fast. His disposition was retiring—shrinking, almost—and his feet continually got in his way.

For several months Mr. Fizz had held the position of assistant director under J. Cæsar Clump—which was equivalent to marking him as a person lacking initiative and courage. His particular task was to accept the blame for anything and everything that went wrong—and to look after the mass of worrbersome and intricate details attendant upon the filming of a two-reel comedy.

But Eddie was a quiet, tenacious sort of a chap who ambited great things and held his official title above the extremely slender pay envelope. Therefore when President Orifice R. Latimer informed him that he was to be temporarily elevated to the rank of director with absolute charge of a company for one single picture—he stammered and stuttered and tripped over his own feet and gargled his thanks.

They eventually dismissed him—and gave themselves over to a session of uncontrolled

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mirth. The skies were indeed lightening—and what had promised to be a severe storm was now rapidly assuming the proportions of hilarious comedy.

Cæsar was summoned and the high spots of the scheme outlined to him. For a few moments he stared in silent amazement: then he seated himself abruptly and rocked with laughter. The idea of Eddie Fizz directing anybody was irresistibly amusing—the fact that the directee was to be Sicily Clump made it absolutely excruciating.

“When them two gits together,” chortled Cæsar—“Oh, Golly! Eddie Fizz don’t know enough to tell nobody nothin’—an’ Sicily woul’n’t do it nohow.”

Cæsar broke the gladsome tidings to Sicily that night. She was immediately all smiles and good humor, and Mr. Clump looked at her and pondered: “When things goes her way—they ain’t no gal sweeter. But git her crossed up, an’ Mistuh Trouble woul’n’t reckernize his own twin brother.”

Until after midnight two colossal brains concentrated upon the scenario which was to begin and end Sicily’s stellar career in the movies. Messrs. Orifice R. Latimer and Florian Slappey labored long and earnestly over a



script, which, when completed, was a rare confection of hairbreadth absurdities.

The scenario told the story of a young married couple. The husband, it appeared, was not disinclined to philander and the wife was not only wise, but jealous. The story exposition was obtained by much smashing of crockery and throwing of custard pies—against the great dramatic moment when the wife learns that her husband has made an engagement to take another woman joyriding that night.

Whereupon, the wife vows terrible vengeance. She dresses in masculine garb and conceals herself behind a tree in front of the other woman's house. The husband drives up in a fine, rented car. He enters the house for his lady-love. The disguised wife emerges from the shadows, pitches the chauffeur into the gutter and takes the wheel.

The husband and lady friend start into the country, never suspecting that dire danger handles the throttle. **The** happy couple is almost too happy. The wife in the front seat grows angrier and angrier. A great determination comes to her: She will wreck the car—absolutely, totally and completely.

It was from this point on that Messrs. Latimer and Slappey outdid themselves. The comedy point of the story appeared to be that the

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car was unwreckable. The scenario was filled with those choice morsels of slapstick which are fondly referred to as gags: the car was to approach a cliff at top speed—then stop, without apparent reason, and back away. It was to be directed at forty miles an hour straight at a stone wall—and at the moment of impact, a hole was to open in the wall and the car pass through safely. It was to be projected straight at a giant oak tree—and then refuse to collide; running round and round the tree while the erring couple in the rear clung fearfully to each other.

And finally, according to this *opus magnificus*, the wife was to give it up as a bad job. She was to drive the car back to town and stop before a hospital, where the wreck of a hysterical lady friend and the remains of the husband were to be carted upstairs and placed in separate wards. The reconciliation was to come at the bedside of the husband.

The authors looked at each other and chuckled.

"That story," announced Latimer, "ain't so wuss."

"Us has made some which was terribler," admitted Florian. "But that ain't neither hither or yon. What we is after is that Sicily Clump should catch thunder—an' when she begins

drivin' that car th'oo the woods like the scenario call for—well, it just strikes me that somethin' is boun' to go wrong some place. An' no matter does it or not, the whole pitcher is gwine be so awful that when it gits showed down to the Champeen, Sicily gits hooted out of the theater."

Two days later the Eddie Fizz unit of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., started work. It was not a particularly imposing group: Director Fizz, nervous and diffident and very apologetic; a 'prentice cameraman; a general helper; the young amateur who was to play the rôle of lady friend—and, superb in her new glory—Sicily Clump.

The entire southeast corner of the studio was turned over to this new company, with the announcement that no one would interfere with them—and they were to interfere with no one. A certain cash budget was placed at the disposal of Mr. Fizz, and he was furnished with an electrical equipment consisting of one sun arc, two broadsides and two seventy-ampere spots. For the first time since the hour of Sicily's arrival, tranquillity once more pervaded the Midnight lot.

Nor was the tranquillity entirely passive. Each person on the lot who had quivered under the sting of Sicily's caustic criticism

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grinned gleefully in anticipation of the sweet revenge which was to be theirs. They knew that the cards were stacked against Mrs. Clump—hopelessly, impossibly stacked—and so occasionally they peeped into the Fizz section of the studio and came away grinning.

There was little doubt of one fact: Eddie Fizz and Sicily Clump did not suspect that they were being conspired against. They worked earnestly and enthusiastically. From immediately after breakfast until late in the evening the spots blazed on their sets. Then came the day when they commenced shooting exteriors. Sicily returned from her initial adventures somewhat bedraggled but still burning with the fire of dramatic ambition.

"How you gittin' along, Sicily?" inquired her husband solicitously.

"Pretty good."

"Like pitcher-actin'?"

"Kind of."

"It ain't so easy as cabarets, is it?"

"No-o—— But us is gittin' along all right."

Cæsar cocked his head on one side and eyed her speculatively. "You look kind of bunged up, honey."

"Do I?"

"Yeh. You ain't happened to an accident, has you?"

"Not ezac'ly. Of course, in my art there's a heap of things which ain't so gentle."

She was game, and for a moment Cæsar found in his heart a scintilla of pity for the discomfiture which was in store for her. It was on the tip of his tongue to warn her—but memory of what had happened stayed him. It was essential to his own peace of mind and the continued prosperity of Midnight that Mrs. Clump be taught a severe and drastic lesson.

Work in High Speed, the first Eddie Fizz-Sicily Clump production, proceeded slowly. But it did proceed. There were days when Mrs. Clump returned to her home and fell across the bed in exhaustion. There were evenings when Mr. Fizz sought a dark corner of the lot and concealed himself in the shadows, head in hands, striving to make himself believe that all would be well. The very intensity of the two principals served merely to whet the enthusiasms of the others on the lot: it was too absurdly funny, this grim struggle of a pair of incompetents to turn out a first-rate picture.

Never before had matters run as smoothly on the lot. Cæsar Clump brought with him daily fresh pep and enthusiasm: he drove his company hard and they thrived on it. "An' in about a week," chuckled Latimer, "the Fizz pitcher is gwine be showed at the Champeen—

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an' then we gits our freedom fum Mrs. Clump, sho' nuff."

"Have you seen any of the rushes?" inquired Opus Randall.

"No. Ain't nobody seen 'em, an' we ain't aimin' to. Eddie an' Sicily is cuttin' an' titlin' the pitcher themse'ves. We ain't gwine see nothin' until it gits showed at the Champeen."

Once work was suspended for three days when the trick automobile went contrary to script directions. Mrs. Clump nursed various contusions and the automobile went into the shop for repairs. During that interval Eddie immersed himself in the task of cutting and assembling. He appeared only at lunch time, and then he wore a harassed expression. They treated him with mock deference and addressed him always as "Director Fizz."

At length came the announcement that the picture was finished. Arrangements were immediately negotiated with the management of the Champion Theater for a showing that night. The manager was a trifle doubtful. Midnight previews were very popular with the patrons of the Champion, and he desired a little time for exploitation.

"Not on this one you don't," negatived J. Cæsar Clump, and explained the reason. The manager of the Champion grinned.



"I understand. We'll just run it off without any special display."

But thanks to the assiduous word-of-mouth efforts of Florian Slappey, Opus Randall, *et al.*, a huge crowd was present at the Champion that night when the heroine of the big feature picture transferred the powder from her cheeks to the hero's vest.

Everybody even remotely connected with Midnight was there—and they all guessed why. True, no orders had been given directly—but the understanding was quite clear: the picture would be terrible and they, as supposedly disinterested members of the audience, were to let the world know that they considered it terrible. In brief, the new star was to be taken for a ride—an exceedingly tough ride.

But if the big boys of the organization came to scoff, Mr. Fizz and Mrs. Clump were unaware of that fact. True, Eddie wore a worried, rather apologetic look—and he tripped continually over his splay feet and tried to appear unconcerned. But there was apparently no doubt in Sicily's mind that this was her hour of supremest triumph. She swept into the theater—to seats especially reserved—in an evening gown and a wrap of sapphire and silver. Across her colorado-maduro forehead she sported a bandeau of glittering rhinestones



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which flashed their brummagem brilliance to all corners of the house.

J. Cæsar accompanied her. A great and pervasive peace was upon him: this night marked definitely the end of his worst troubles.

The feature picture ended. A hush fell over the audience as they were informed from the screen that "Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc.—Orifice R. Latimer, President—Presents High Speed, a Comedy in Two Reels, by Orifice R. Latimer and Florian Slappey." Immediately thereafter came the first thrill of the evening, for the entire screen flamed with the letters which notified one and all that this picture was

DIRECTED BY  
EDWIN BOSCOE FIZZ

There was a roar of laughter and a ripple of applause, but before that gained headway a new title leaped to meet interested gazes—a title different from anything Midnight had ever presented:

Presenting Midnight's Glorious New Star  
—and then a dissolve to Sicily in full evening garb and another dissolve to—

SICILY CLUMP

Somehow the scoffers forgot to scoff. The introduction was both impressive and dignified. It had class. J. Cæsar frowned and shook his head. Evidently Mr. Fizz possessed greater intelligence than he had been credited with.

And then the picture started. It started fast and well. Inside the first three minutes somebody in the house laughed heartily and from that moment on the spectators were in a continuous roar of merriment.

Before the end of the first reel every man in the house knew that nothing short of an impossible letdown could keep High Speed from ranking with the very best comedies turned out by Midnight. It had been produced with a painstaking attention to detail; its story unfolded directly and simply; its direction was deft, almost subtle in spots—yet its slap-stick was broad enough and funny enough to evoke roars of laughter.

But the evening's triumph was distinctly Sicily's. Every man and woman present knew that she was indeed more than worthy to head the Midnight's roster of stars. The scene which had caused her three days in bed was a riot; the antics of the errant automobile which refused to wreck were irresistibly funny. And the close-ups of the couple on the rear seat had

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been taken obviously when their terror was more real than simulated.

It was Sicily, though, who flashed most brilliantly. She screened magnificently and her comedy sense had been gauged to a nicety by the slew-footed director. The house shook with applause—and high above all of it came the deep-throated roar of Orifice R. Latimer.

The picture ended in a shock of acclaim. The house lights were flashed on. And there, before them all, Director J. Cæsar Clump made the *amende honorable*. He took Sicily in his arms and kissed her.

"Honey-gal," he announced sincerely, "Ise proud of you."

He was swept aside by the ponderous Mr. Latimer, who seized both hands of his new star, and then Florian Slappey insinuated himself between them and claimed credit for having fathered the idea of starring Sicily in a picture. It was a wild, jubilant scene—and with amazing absence of professional jealousy, each actor in the company came forward to add his bit of praise to the encomiums being showed upon the radiant Mrs. Clump.

From the Champion they repaired immediately to the office of Lawyer Evans Chew, where a two-year contract was drawn between Midnight and Sicily. She signed happily—and

did not see the guilty look which passed between Latimer and her husband.

But there was no hint of restraint now: they paid homage to her—and Latimer fairly oozed his enthusiasm:

“You is the best ever, Mrs. Clump. An’ yo’ new pitchers is gwine be sweller than this even. For one thing, us gives you a real director.”

In the corner, Mr. Edwin Boscoe Fizz cringed. Nobody had paid particular attention to Eddie. But Sicily smiled and shook her head.

“Nossuh,” she negatived. “You ain’t gwine do nothin’ of the sort.”

“We shuah is. We is gwine let J. Cæsar direct you hisse’f.”

“Nope. Eddie Fizz is my director—an’ the only one I uses.”

“But, Mrs. Clump——”

“I ain’t willin’ to be butted, Mistuh Latimer. I reckon Cæsar is all right, but he cain’t direct me in comedy stuff.”

“How come not?”

“Because,” she answered, “he takes me too serious!”

And so Eddie Fizz was signed up as a full-fledged director. And immediately after affixing his signature to the contract, he called J. Cæsar aside.

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"Mistuh Clump," he said earnestly, "I wants to thank you."

"Thank me? Fo' what?"

"It was you that learned me all I know about directin'. I has been studyin' yo' stuff—an' I reckon I know how good you is, even if I don't know much else."

The generous mood which was afflicting all of them had not escaped J. Cæsar Clump.

"Eddie," he said, "you don't know what a swell director you is. Why, Boy, you is a wizzid. An' instead of learnin' fum me, there's a heap of things I'd like to learn off you."

"Shuh—you talks foolishment."

"No, I don't. An' the chieftest thing I craves to learn is this: How in the world did you ever manage to direct Sicily?"

A slow grin creased the lips of Director Eddie Fizz.

"That's easy answered," he responded quietly. "You see, I ain't her husband, and so she didn't have to refuse to do what I told her!"

## *VII. The Lion and the Uniform*

Orifice R. Latimer stood at the window of his private office and gazed moodily across the modest but busy lot. The mahogany countenance of the chief executive was lined with worry and his eyes were focused bitterly upon a long and elegant gentleman who strutted from set to set, voicing adverse criticism in caustic words.

This gentleman imparted to President Latimer a distinct and poignant pain. When he answered at all it was to the name of Eustace Gribble, and he took pains to inform all and sundry that his home was in Chicago and, furthermore, that he considered Birmingham a decidedly second-rate city.

Eustace was the period at the end of President Latimer's announcement of expansion. For six months the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. had been delighting movie fans of all colors and sexes throughout the country with its hilarious two-reel comedies, and the distributors had recently renewed their contract for an additional two years at a considerable increase in the per negative price. Im-

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mediately thereafter President Latimer, following a brief consultation with J. Cæsar Clump, his director, had engaged the services of Eustace Gribble to supplement the Mid-night's growing list of twinkling stars.

The contract which Eustace demanded and obtained was written in figures which four months previously might have bankrupted the infant firm. He arrived in Birmingham with three trunks, a malacca cane, a large store of intolerant conceit and a vast contempt for any city smaller than Chicago. Also he brought with him a considerable reputation as colored musical comedy comedian. He had played the Loop in an all-colored show and had visited Broadway briefly in the same capacity. He announced frequently and earnestly that he was the swellest cullud actor which ever smeared grease paint on a colorado-maduro expression—and let it be distinctly understood that he knew more about acting than the entire Mid-night organization could ever hope to learn.

From the very first he was—in theatrical parlance—a flop. He was unwilling to take direction and entirely too argumentative. He patronized his fellow-actors and incurred their hatred, whereupon they crabbed his scenes with keen professional dexterity. He bred discord on a lot where harmony meant profit



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and his histrionic work was decidedly below par.

But he swaggered in the face of the anathema which was hurled upon him and defied Midnight to smash his contract.

"I get my salary for one year," he proclaimed, "and there isn't anything can keep me from it except refusing to participate what I'm told. Believe me, gentlemen—I'm not refusing."

Nor did he. But when they told him to do something which made no particular appeal, he fluffed it in such an obvious manner that in self-defense they altered the direction so that it would be more to his liking. He was generally and devoutly despised.

Eustace, however, knew several things about himself which he wisely withheld from his employers. At the time of his signing he had verged very close upon financial insolvency and the seventy-five dollars a week they were paying him represented more cash than he had earned in any seven-day period in all his lurid life.

Unfortunately for him, he was a too firm convert to the theory of swank. He deluded himself into the belief that others looked up to him because of his high-and-mighty ways. And so he gave his natural ego full rein and

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scoffed at the open animosity of every one else of importance on the Midnight lot.

Indifferent to the plans or opinions of others, he neither knew nor cared that at the moment he was explaining to an electrician how a new scene should be lighted, the door of President Latimer's office was flung violently back and the goggled and putteed J. Cæsar Clump burst in upon his chief.

The slender little director throbbed with excitement. His dark brown face shone delightedly as he leaped across the room and pounded one skinny fist upon the fleshy back of the unhappy magnate.

"Orifice," he exulted, "Ise got it!"

"You has got it," groaned Mr. Latimer, "an' I is gittin' it."

"Ain't it the truth? Reckon you has been flingin' yo' eyes on that no-'count, wuthless slice of tripe named Eustace Gribble, ain't you?"

"That's the one thing I ain't been doin' nothin' else but." Latimer's voice was freighted with bitterness. "Ev'ry time I looks at that man I gits sorrier an' sorrier that I is so fat."

"How come?"

"Cause if I was leaner, I could kick myse'f."

"'Bout hirin' him to star fo' us?"

## *The Lion and the Uniform*

"Uh-huh."

"Shuh!" Clump spoke soothingly. "You ain't got no cause to worry 'bout that feller."

"Ain't got no cause! Man! You says words but they don't talk no sense. 'Tain't just the seventy-five a week us has got to pay him fo' a year. It's the fac' that he's raisin' hell all over the lot. Yonder he is gittin' our best 'lectrician sore as a boil—an' Welford Potts an' Opus Randall bofe is th'eatenin' to quit if we don't do somethin'. I'll bet that man is costin' us two hund'ed dollars a week."

"Well," suggested J. Cæsar suavely, "le's us git rid of him."

"Fumadiddles! Ain't he got a contrac' with us?"

"Yeh. Temporary."

"Temporary my foots. That contrac' las's as long as he don't refuse to play no part which we sets him to, an' he ain't refused none yet."

"But," murmured the elated J. Cæsar, "he will!"

"Will which?"

"Refuse a part."

Hope flashed briefly in the president's eyes. "You has got a suggestion?"

"Man, Ise plumb suggestive to-day. But I has got to handle this my own se'f, an' I asks

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you: Is you willin' that I should have a free hand?"

"You can have anything that's free."

"Fine! Now s'posin' you gits the comp'ny in confe'ence. I craves to make a 'nouncement."

The presidential summons was sent out and ten minutes later there commenced trooping into the golden oak office the chief dignitaries of the lot.

First and foremost was Opus Randall, rotund and cumbersome; Welford Potts, his dandified and slender co-star; Excelsior Nix, the broad-mouthed child wonder whose radiant personality was becoming known from Portland to Portland; and the immaculate Florian Slappey, his screen mentor. There was Evergreen Tapp, local recruit to ingenue work, and Enoch, her long-drawn-out husband, who was by way of ascending to eccentric stardom. Then came Director Eddie Fizz, and Iodinah Jones, who played bits; these were followed by the chief electrician, the head carpenter, the master mechanic, the art director, the cutter, the cameraman. They seated themselves about the four walls of the room and waited expectantly, for this was a larger conference than usual and presaged important disclosures.

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President Latimer sat at his desk and gazed with kindly affection upon the assembled cast: an excellent outfit. J. Cæsar Clump, radiating triumph, lounged on Latimer's desk and swung one shiny leg easily as he drummed with his well-manicured finger-nails on the desk top and awaited the arrival of the honor guest.

At length he came: tall and elegant and with a sneering twist to his lips. Eustace Gribble fancied himself infinitely better than those others—and made his opinion unmistakable. A murmur of general distaste ran around the room as he slouched forward to the desk which he tapped insolently with his cane.

"I have arrived!" he announced.

Latimer swept him with a narrow-lidded glance of profound disgust.

"Well, now—" he remarked "—ain't it just too sweet of you to cease from doin' nothin' an' come to our li'l' meetin'?"

Eustace detected the sarcasm and was blandly indifferent. His contract placed him above worry. "Moving-picture presidents are a fearful nuisance," he observed languidly.

A gasp went up. Orifice Latimer's face purpled—and when he would have leaped upon the man, J. Cæsar Clump intervened.

"Ssssh! Brother Latimer. Don't go gittin' our finest an' most expensive star mad."

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Latimer's mouth opened and closed like the jaw of a fish. Then, at a warning wink from Mr. Clump, he subsided. As for Eustace, that gentleman swept the room with his supercilious glance and remarked idly that it certainly was degrading to have to associate with such hoy polloy. He was glad to see, he informed the gathering, that Mr. Clump, alone among them, had sufficient sense to appreciate his high estate.

Clump bowed acknowledgment and called the meeting to order. He moved to the front of the desk and addressed them at length, starting with the day when the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., was launched and detailing its history down to the present moment.

"Us has growed an' growed, an' growed," he proclaimed. "We is bein' shown in one hund'ed an' forty-two first run houses th'oughout the length an' breadth of this fair land. The names of Opus Randall an' Welford Potts an' li'l' Excelsior Nix is becomin' common in milliums of American homes.

"We have just signed distribution contrac's fo' two additional years after our fust year is ended. We are going to git bigger prices an' so we is gwine spen' mo' money in making our pitchers. We is closin' out the doubtful era an' enterin' upon one which is gwine be a heap mo'

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prosperouser. An', ladies an' gemmun, brethern an' sister'n, we stahts off on this new deal with one asset which is the biggest an' bestest an' brightest any comp'ny in the country has got. Folks, us faces this new period holdin' under contrac' that king of all cullud motion-pitcher actors—" he gestured magnificently—"Mistuh Eustace Gribble!"

There was an audible hush, followed by a scraping of feet. Jaws dropped and eyes popped. Somebody hissed as Eustace rose and bowed his endorsement.

"I compliment you, Mr. Clump, on recognizing your best asset."

"Right you is, Brother Gribble: right you is. I is a heap of things, but I ain't blind. An' what I has got us all assembled in solemn concave for, is to 'nounce the fust story us shoots under our policy of expansion. In that pitcher, Mistuh Gribble—you is gwine be starred."

Eustace flushed lavender with delight. He began to realize that he had never before thoroughly appreciated the manifold good qualities of the dynamic little director. Why, he had more than suspected that Clump did not like him. Yet here he was getting his due at the hands of that very individual. He paused to regret the several occasions when he had publicly insulted J. Cæsar—and the greater num-



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ber of times he had caused that gentleman's work to be more arduous than it should.

"This new pitcher," announced J. Cæsar Clump, "is gwine be grand an' also magnificent. It's gwine be filled with screamin' comedy, ambitious antics an' convulsive contortions. Us is all gwine have parts in it. An' best of all, it's gwine be a coschume pitcher."

"What you mean?" asked a voice from the rear. "A coschume pitcher?"

"That means us all wears uniforms," explained the director. "Coschume pitchers is all the rage now—an' they is makin' milliums of dollars. So us comes along an' does a burlesque, see? There ain't nothin' we ain't gwine do. In this pitcher us is gwine have a hero an' a heroine an' a villyun an' ev'ything—even wile animals."

"Says which?"

"Wile animals. That is," he amended hastily, "we is gwine have one wile animal."

"What genus of animal?" Eustace asked the question, his precise voice trembling slightly. He was leaning forward in his seat and his lean face was marked by premonition.

J. Cæsar Clump smiled sweetly. "A lion!" he answered.

"Wh-where do you propose to obtain a lion at?"

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"Ain't preposin' to obtain him. He is a'ready obtone."

An idea penetrated Eustace's consciousness: it occurred to him that he was being ganged.

"And what, if I may request, has the king of the jungles to do with this picture?"

Cæsar shrugged. "Nothin' special. He just gives us a li'l' class an' backgroun'. You see, in the las' stupenjous scene him an' the gladiator fights."

"Which gladiator?"

"The hero gladiator which says he is willin' to fight that lion with a sword to keep his gal from bein' et up. Co'se does he kill the lion, the gal won't be et; but does he fail, why he gits et hisse'f. But of course the way the pitcher is wrote, the lion gits kilt."

"Is—is this an educated lion?" questioned Eustace earnestly.

"A which?"

"An educated lion? You see, I was wondering if he had read the scenario."

The director laughed applaudingly. "You is the humorestest feller, Brother Gribble: thinkin' us hiahs readin' lions."

"I know. But who is going to elucidate to that Emperor of Beasts that he is to die when the hero gets in the aroma with him?"

"Oh! I tells him that. Lions understan'

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pretty good. Co'se the gladiator has got to poke him a few times with the sword. You see, Brother Gribble, this lion ain't so terrible wile. We has rented him offen a circus which is winterin' heah in Bummingham, an' his keeper says he ain't really et no human bein's fo' two or th'ee yeahs."

Eustace had risen. His face was grave and set and much of his hauteur had vanished. Suspicion was slowly crystallizing into certainty, and that certainty was substantiated at sight of the grinning faces of the assembled members.

Behind the golden oak desk the pudgy face of President Orifice R. Latimer was beaming. He longed to embrace his director—he visioned Eustace refusing the rôle and thus automatically terminating the obnoxious contract. His voice came softly across the room.

"An' what part is Mistuh Gribble gwine play?" he inquired of J. Cæsar.

"Him?" Mr. Clump swung on his chief—and winked solemnly. "Why, him bein' our finest, best an' mos' expensivest star an' also the wonderfulest actor—he's gwine play the heroical gladiator!"

A deep, throaty chuckle came from the lips of Opus Randall. Some one else in the room laughed outright. There was an air of general

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jubilation—in which, however, Mr. Eustace Gribble failed to participate. His brow was corrugated with lines of worry. He saw through the whole Machiavellian scheme.

“But, Mr. Clump—suppose that lion eats me up?”

“Shuh! Eustace—I woul’n’t go worryin’ ’bout that. This lion is awful pertickeler ’bout his eatments.”

“Yes, but he might be unusually hungry on that particular diem.”

“Don’t you go botherin’ yo’ han’some haid ’bout that. Us attends to all details.”

Eustace entertained a haunting suspicion that J. Cæsar spoke with unnecessary enthusiasm. He made one final gesture of defiance.

“I positively refuse to combat with a lion!”

J. Cæsar leaned forward earnestly.

“You welches?”

“I refuse.”

The director simulated agony. “Goodness Goshness, Miss Agnes, Brother Gribble—’tain’t possible! Don’t you know that does you refuse to play any part us commands, yo’ contrac’ becomes terminated?”

“Yes, but——”

“An’ sho’ly you ain’t plannin’ to severe yo’ connection with this buddin’ an’ flourishin’

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firm just because us requests that you becomes a lion-slayin' hero?"

It was all crystal-clear to Eustace. He decided to hold his peace temporarily. Thought of canceling the luscious contract with Midnight was abhorrent—and he yearned to show these grinning ebony faces that he was the great man he assumed to be. Wherefore, he bowed in apparent acquiescence and moved from the room with only a trifle less grandeur than he had exhibited upon his entrance.

At a gesture from the director, the others followed and as the door closed behind the last of them Orifice R. Latimer collapsed upon his desk in a paroxysm of uncontrollable mirth.

Meanwhile outside Florian Slappey moved to the side of the pariah Eustace. Florian dropped a commiserating hand on the arm of the miserable star.

"Golly, Eustace—they has shuah stang you good an' proper!"

Mr. Gribble detected the note of genuine sympathy and looked down in surprise. True, he and Florian had never been open enemies, but on more than a single occasion Eustace had wilted Florian with his intolerant manner and his vitriolic tongue. Yet the face of Darktown's fashion plate was wreathed in sympathy and his demeanor was one of vast friend-

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liness, so Eustace anathematized himself for his dislike of the past and draped one arm affectionately around Florian's narrow shoulders.

"A conspiracy!" he sibilated.

"Uh-huh. An' that ain't all. I bet you feel just like an accident goin' somewheres to happen."

"I am incommensurately miserable, Mr. Slappey. This is a vast and onerous trick which is being purpletrated upon me and I shall protest vehemently."

"Tha's the way to talk. I woul'n't let nobody put no such of a thing over on me 'thout raisin' hell."

"Mmm! Of course they have got me. If I refuse to play this part, my contract becomes canceled and of none effect. It says so in writing. Of course that's what they desire. It is a perfidious performance——"

"Gosh! If I knowed all them big words, I woul'n't care did I have a job or not."

"There have been times in my life," confessed Eustace with amazing candor, "when I have longed to reduce my vocabulary to two words—and to be entitled to use them with authority."

"What them words is?"

"Ham and eggs!"

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"Well, hush my mouf! Think of you bein' hungry."

"I prefer not to. But that confession will clarify to you my preference for not terminating a contract which carries with it a satisfactory weekly honorium. And if I don't glad-iate for them, they will dispense with my professional services and I shall again have to seek employment in my native heath of Chicago."

Florian shook his head and linked his arm in that of the other man. "Le's us walk downtown an' inhale a few barbecoues at Bud Peaglar's place. I always feels happier after I has et hearty."

They moved slowly down the street, discussing in bitter tones the catastrophe which was preparing to shake hands with the imported star. Eustace was more troubled than he cared to admit—and he admitted a great deal.

It did not occur to him that this scheme against his continued residence in Birmingham was justified. He could not see that he had destroyed the tranquillity of the Midnight lot, and therefore materially impaired the efficiency of that well-oiled organization. He saw only that he was being efficiently victimized—and in all the city of more than two hun-



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dred thousand persons there was no one save Florian Slappey who cared to hear his troubles.

He was exceedingly contrite as to Florian: he wondered whether Florian had forgotten—or forgiven—the many occasions when he had staggered that gentleman with an acid word or supercilious gesture. He now craved Florian's friendship; he experienced a deep affection for him as they sat shoulder to shoulder in Bud Peaglar's and swallowed drafts of steaming coffee and sank their teeth in succulent barbecue.

"What you got to do," announced Mr. Slappey suddenly, "is think."

"Think? I never heard of thoughts killing lions."

"Brains can do anything. Ain't you ever seen them advertisements of a man makin' a lion crawl away by just lookin' him in the eye?"

"Yes—I've seen them. But maybe this lion hasn't."

"Tha's true—— But there must be a way out. I tell you, Mistuh Gribble, I has been caught in a heap of tight places in my life, an' there ain't ary time yet my brain has th'owed me down."

"You mean you might conceive a plan?"

"I might."

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Eustace's hand tightened on Florian's arm. "If you only could——"

"Gimme twenty-four hours, Eustace. I has got the workin'est brains! Meantime you just strut yo' stuff aroun' that lot as though fightin' lions was the fondest things you was of."

Eustace promised. At the door they separated—Eustace walking down Eighteenth Street, swinging his cane with assumed insouciance. For a few moments Florian stood watching him, then a faint smile played across his lips and he moved in the opposite direction.

"Poor feller," he murmured. And then, more sharply: "But ain't he goshamighty uppity?"

The following day was one of jollification on the lot of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. News of the approaching discomfiture of the despised Mr. Gribble had been bruited about and wherever that gentleman went he was greeted with triumphant grins. As for Eustace, he bore up nobly and made himself more thoroughly detested than ever.

Once he lounged against the corner of a building and overheard a wager:

"Five dollars it is."

"Done with you. Remember Ise bettin' he gits et up."

"Tha's it."

## *The Lion and the Uniform*

"Co'se the lion don't have to swaller clothes an' all."

"Right. An' I feels pow'ful sorry fo' the lion."

Beads of cold perspiration stood out upon the Gribble forehead. Even money that he would act the part of a lion's dinner. The prospect was not enticing. Eustace was fond of his job, but he was even more attached to his life. He was in a highly nervous state when he met Florian Slappey that night.

Florian made a poor job of concealing his elation. He was fairly bursting with news, but despite Eustace's best efforts to extract from the Beau Brummel of Darktown the reason for the latter's enthusiasm, Florian waited until he was safely ensconced with his companion in a corner of the modest lobby of the Cozy Home Hotel for Colored. Then he made his declaration.

"Eustace," he bubbled, "you is saved!"

"From combating against that lion?" There was a pathetic eagerness in Eustace's voice.

"Uh-huh."

"You're not deluding me, are you?"

"I woul'n't dilute you fo' nothin', Eustace. All day long I has been keepin' my brain busy. An' when finely my big idea come along, I

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went right down an' held conversation with the gemmun which owns that lion."

Mr. Gribble felt a grand passion for Florian. He ached to indicate to his friend that he was grateful.

"How did you work it, Florian?"

"Easy," remarked Mr. Slappey. "Just by readin' an' usin' my head."

"And the lion will not be there at all?"

"Oh, shuah—he's gwine be there."

"And me?"

"So is you."

Eustace frowned. This didn't sound so encouraging. "But if I am there and the lion is there, what is to prevent his making a gastronomical feast off me?"

Mr. Slappey tapped his skull significantly. "Brains!" he murmured.

"Whose?"

"My own."

Mr. Gribble begged for information. Florian beamed.

"'Splainin' my schemes is the most thing I like to do. Now I ast you: has you ever heard about Androcles an' the lion?"

"Uh-uh." Eustace shook his head dazedly. "It don't sound reasonable."

"Now listen, Brother Gribble: it all happened thisaway, an' it's history. The lady

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down to the liberry shown it to me in a book. You see, this feller Androcles was an awful kind-hearted feller, which would even have supported his mother-in-law or something if he'd of had one. Well, he was walkin' down the road one day an' who should he see but the lion!"

"This same lion?"

"A worser one than this. Well, this lion was layin' down in a ditch, kind of cryin' like his heart was busted, an' Mistuh Androcles walked right up to him an' says: 'Hey, Lion—what's eatin' on you?' The lion he coul'n't talk no man-talk so he just looks up an' weeps a li'l' bit an' hol's out his paw an' what should it be doin' but bleedin'."

"No?"

"Yeh. Bleedin' real blood. An' Androcles, which has got a kind heart, he sees that Ol' Mistuh Lion has done stepped on a thorn which same is in his paw an' he can't get it out an' Androcles says, 'You poor kid—you suttinly must of been havin' a hell of a time!' An' with that he gits down on his knees an' whups out his pocket knife an' fust thing you know he has cut that thorn right out of Brother Lion's paw."

"Goodness!" Eustace was enormously interested. "Did he really?"

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"Didn't do nothin' else. An' that ain't all. Him an' the lion wishes each other good mawnin' an' Androcles walks on home an' lives happy ever after—fo' a li'l' while.

"Well, it seems that one day 'bout a month or six weeks later, he gits in bad with the police an' they dump him into the Big Rock an' when he gits tried the judge says, 'Androcles,' he says, 'I don't know whether is you guilty or ain't you, so this afternoon I takes you down to the bull ring an' th'ows you in with a lion. If that lion eats you up, it proves you is guilty an' also that you is dead. If he don't swally you, why then you is innocent an' out you gits.'

"Now, Androcles thinks tha's a pretty bum way to judge, but what can he do? So that afternoon he goes down an' hundreds of folks is there all dressed up like fo' a picnic, an' the saxophones toot as if it was a dance or some-thin', an' there is Androcles all dressed in a shroud an' the undertaker has got his ambulance ready—an' a gate opens an' who should come in but the ve'y same identical lion which Androcles had took the thorn out of his foot! Yassuh, that ve'y same own lion. Well, he reckernizes Androcles, an' he comes up waggin' his tail an' instead of eatin' Androcles up, he just licks his face an' says in lion-talk, 'How

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is you, Brother Androcles? Fine weather us is havin'.' An' right off the crowd yells that Androcles is innocent an' they turn him loose an' he goes home with the lion an' they both eat a big dish of Brunswick stew fo' supper."

Mr. Eustace Gribble had listened raptly. When Florian finished speaking, he clasped his hands rapturously: "Gee! How fortunate that gentleman was!"

"You said it, Brother. But he wa'n't no mo' fortunater than what you is gwine be."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this——" Florian bent forward earnestly. "To-night you is gwine down to the place where that lion is at an' you is gwine pull a thorn out of his foot——"

"Just a minute." Eustace paled a bit. "I'm not so terribly anxious to fool around lions' thorns. How do I know that story really happened?"

Florian triumphantly presented a book secured that day from the Colored Free Public Library. He thumbed the pages and presented the volume. "Read fo' yo'se'f," he commanded. "An' remember—it's all hist'ry."

Eustace was impressed. There were facts incontrovertibly in type. But certain doubts yet lurked.



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"How do you know this lion is going to have a thorn in his foot, Florian?"

Mr. Slappey grinned. "I slipped his keeper a five-spot to put it in."

Eustace was lost in admiration. "But suppose he eats me up when I'm trying to extract said thorn?"

"He cain't. He's in a cage an' you is gwine be outside, lookin' in. Even does he git mad, he cain't reach you."

Mr. Gribble considered the matter from all angles. It appeared acid-proof, and there was the book to back the theory. "You are quite positive that after I have performed this kind service, the lion will not forget my identity when we meet in the motion picture?"

"Shuh! Not a chance, cullud man! Lions never forgets nothin'."

At length Eustace agreed. It appeared to him that he had everything to gain and nothing to lose. Wherefore the following night he accompanied Florian to the old warehouse in North Birmingham where the lion was stored, awaiting the hour of his arena appearance which was scheduled for the following day.

Eustace was apprehensive. All day long he had been preoccupied. Two or three times he had visited that portion of the lot where the carpenters were working with diabolical speed

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to complete the arena where he was to be cast into the jaws of a man-eating beast. They seemed to take far too much interest in their work—and J. Cæsar Clump had announced that the shooting of that portion of the script was to be done at once, as they were already paying rental on the lion.

It was eight o'clock when they reached the warehouse. The lion's keeper greeted them: he was an undersized and apparently undernourished little man who eyed askance the sartorial elegance of Mr. Gribble. He was more affable with Florian. They opened the door and as the fresh air rushed through the building, its rafters were shaken by a horrific roar. Eustace recoiled.

"I have changed my mind," he announced positively.

"Pff! Ol' lion cain't hurt you. He's in a cage."

The keeper said nothing. He moved forward toward the far end of the cavernous space where a rusty iron cage rested. The place was lighted fitfully by a single carbon bulb which cast an eerie yellow light and sent ghastly shadows dancing about the walls.

Florian was unafraid, and it was that person's attitude which loaned courage to the wilted Eustace. He moved forward.

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The lion was large, much larger than Eustace had expected. Nor were his protestations entirely confined to whimpers. He was crouched in a corner, his eyes small and blood-shot, and occasionally he paused to lick his right front paw.

"You fixed him all right, Mistuh?" inquired Florian.

"Yes. He's ready." The keeper swung on the terrified Eustace. "Go ahead and yank it out. He can't get at you."

Eustace circled warily. The lion regarded him gravely: he was lying down, head resting on the sawdust, his red tongue occasionally licking the spot on that paw which contained the Androclean thorn.

It was Eustace's desire to postpone eventualities. He wished to see how a few friendly overtures would be received. But the keeper was ill-tempered and in a hurry. "Grab it out!" he commanded.

Eustace stepped within range. He could see the thorn. "Nice lion," he complimented. "Eustace Gribble wouldn't let any lion suffer if he could help it." He inserted one hand through the bars. The lion did not move. Eustace's fingers closed around the end of the thorn. A quiver ran through the lion's body.

Eustace yanked. Out came the cause of the

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lion's misery. And then something quite unexpected happened.

The beast was galvanized into action. A terrible roar reverberated through the warehouse as the animal, with jaws dripping and agape, leaped straight up in the air the height of the cage. Eustace somersaulted away and dropped both the thorn and himself. The lion careened around the cage like one possessed—slamming himself ferociously against the bars as though he desired nothing so much as to get through. Eustace picked himself up and started for the door, but Florian grabbed him.

"Hey! Wait a minute, Brother Gribble. Don't go spoilin' it all—just stick around awhile an' let ol' lion git a chance to reckernize you." He turned to the keeper. "Ain't that right, Mister?"

The man nodded. Eustace remained—reluctantly. Lions were not at the moment very popular with him. He waited until the fury of the beast had abated somewhat, and he saw the lion eventually slink into a corner and lay there whimpering, precisely as had whimpered the jungle king in the Androcles story.

"See," encouraged Florian, "it don't hurt him no mo'. Look at him lickin' the sore place, an' see how grateful he looks at you."

Eustace's spirits perked up a bit. There did

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seem to be a trifle of friendliness in the glance which the lion bestowed upon him. The animal appeared to be apologizing for all the trouble he had caused.

"Go on up an' pat him, Eustace—like the feller in the story done."

Mr. Gribble shook his head. "I infantly prefer to wait until the wound has healed," he decided.

But he did circle the cage two or three times. The lion followed him with his eyes, but made no offensive move. Eustace took heart. After all, the book had foretold this reaction and Eustace believed profoundly in books. When he departed arm-in-arm with Florian, he was less apprehensive of the morrow.

"If it only works!" he sighed.

"It's boun' to, Eustace. Cain't he'p it. Di'n't that book say——"

"Yes. The facts was eluciated clearly, but when that lion started roaring around——" Mr. Gribble sought encouragement. "Didn't you think he appeared friendly before I and you left?"

"Friendly! Honest, Brother Gribble, that lion was lovin' you so much I bet he would of invited you into his cage for dinner, if he had of had any."

"I think you're right, Florian. And by to-

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morrow afternoon, when all the soreness has disappeared from his feets——”

“Jus’ like ol’ Mistuh Androcles. He’ll be plumb tickled to death to see you.”

Florian continued to talk as they journeyed homeward and when at length he left his companion, Eustace Gribble found himself looking forward to the great arena scene with less terror.

After all, he had everything to gain and little to lose—unless one counted his life. Save for the initial outburst of passion on the part of the lion, that animal had operated according to schedule, even to the whimpering. And Eustace had noted approvingly that this particular lion was sadly in need of dental attention.

He visioned himself subduing the lion with a look. He mentally heard the plaudits of the colored Roman populace as he thwarted Clump’s dastardly scheme by frolicking around the arena with the beast which had been programmed to chew him. Of course it would take a bit of nerve—but after all, Eustace and the lion were good friends. He dropped off to sleep, murmuring contentedly——

“Florian Slappey is certainly a perfect gentleman. Sorry I ever was disdainful of him——”

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Then morning dawned.

It early became apparent around the Midnight lot that there would be no lack of extras to act as spectators of the afternoon's drama. Word had been sent out that an audience was desired and prominent colored folks came in droves to witness the dramatic discomfiture of the Chicago importation.

At ten o'clock Eustace Gribble appeared among them. He was garbed in a new suit of clothes, flagrant with checks, and he was twirling his cane as insouciantly as though the world contained no such menace as a lion. One or two persons dared chaff him and he withered each of them with a few biting words.

"Golly Moses!" ejaculated one of the would-be tormentors. "That feller ain't scared of nothin'. I bet he et raw lion steak fo' breakfast'."

As a matter of fact, a night of slumber had heartened Eustace considerably. That morning he had reread the story of Androcles and again held converse with Florian. Between them, they had caused his courage to rise to the sticking point. Eustace almost believed that he desired this encounter with the lion.

The wardrobe mistress was kept busy concocting Roman gowns for the spectators. Old sheets were converted into near-togas and a



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laurel tree near by was well-nigh stripped of leaves that each good Senator might sport a wreath.

At noon the lion arrived via truck. His cage, under the direction of the dilapidated keeper, was placed in a corner of the studio and a runway constructed between it and the arena. This arena was inspected by the keeper, who pronounced it safe.

"Could that lion jump the wall?" questioned Orifice R. Latimer earnestly.

"Naw! He couldn't jump a real thick match-stick."

The shooting was scheduled for two o'clock. At one-thirty Eustace strutted upon the set. He was a thing magnificent in his abbreviated Roman garb, set off by shining aluminum wear which a misguided art director fancied might have been worn by lion-taming gladiators.

Around the noble brow of Mr. Gribble was a narrow band of baby-blue ribbon, which was tied in a bow at the rear of his head and thence descended in two thin pennants. He carried a small sword and his demeanor was so unafraid that the very crowd which had come to jeer him emitted a small cheer.

The camera was rigged up on a safely elevated platform. At ten minutes before two o'clock J. Cæsar Clump appeared to explain

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the action of the scene. He rehearsed the preliminaries and shot them.

"An' now," he bellowed through his megaphone, "Mistuh Gribble heah, which his screen name is Marx Antony, has th'owed the villyun over the wall an' notified the public that he's gwine fight that lion single-handed. He walks out to the middle an' bows an' ev'ybody cheers an' waves their han's. Then Opus Randall, which is playin' the part of the Roman Empire, waves his han' an' the door opens, an' in comes the lion. Is you ready, Brother Gribble?"

Brother Gribble hesitated. He debated earnestly an eleventh-hour retirement, but in the stands he caught a glimpse of Florian Slappey and Florian waved a cheery greeting. A faint, derisive smile played briefly about the lips of Eustace Gribble.

"Bring on your lions," he commanded. "I'm r'arin' to get at 'em."

Clump addressed the camera.

"Ready!" he shouted. "Walk out yonder, Eustace. You folks up there give him a cheer. Action! Cam'ra!"

The scene was on. There was no make-believe about the excitement and enthusiasm of the crowd. No one of them had ever before seen mortal combat between man and lion. As for Eustace, that histrionic artist began to wish

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himself well out of it. Suppose something should go wrong! But pshaw! it couldn't! Didn't the book say——

"Gate!" came the stentorian voice of the director. "Open that gate!"

Eustace, ever the actor, faced the passageway from which the lion was coming. He stood in an unconsciously dramatic attitude, tin sword extended, laurel wreath slightly askew, knees unaccountably trembling.

"Gosh!" he whispered. "I hope Mr. Androcles wasn't a liar!"

At an order barked by the director, Professor Aleck Champagne's Jazzphony Orchestra blared saxophoniously forth from the stands. The crowd rose and cheered, a few of them shedding their togas to disclose the latest Eighteenth Street styles.

And then, slowly, the gate swung back. There was a gasp as the lion appeared!

He wasn't so very much of a lion—but he looked imposing as he stood at the arena entrance, wondering what it was all about. The cage bars were gone—the syncopation of the orchestra beat upon his eardrums with a circusy sound—lacking anything else to do, he advanced into the arena.

Eustace did not move. He ignored Clump's command that he launch an attack. But

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neither did he retreat. President Latimer edged alongside the bewildered director.

"Dawg-gone my hide," he whispered, "us is gwine lose out."

"What you mean: lose out?"

"Eustace ain't scared of that lion a tall."

"Who says so?"

"He ain't runnin', is he?"

"Prob'ly he's too scared."

"Shuh, Cæsar—does you reckon he ever would of went this far if he had been scared? Ain't you sawn him struttin' his stuff all over the lot this mawnin' like lions was the fondest animals he was of? Seems like to me he must of discovered that this is a tame lion which ain't never hurt nobody an' woul'n't know how to if he wanted. Tha's where we made a mistake—bein' so dawg-gone careful he woul'n't git kilt. Us has just simply pulled a bone—and is out a heap of money."

J. Cæsar sniffed—but he was worried.

Certainly Eustace showed no signs of terror—and terror was the emotion for which the director had prayed. For one thing, the scenario had been written that way. And for another thing, he knew that if Eustace overcame the wild beast, the dissension which had previously existed on the Midnight lot would be as nothing to what would follow.

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"C'mon, Eustace! Fight 'im!"

But that Eustace refused to do. He stood his ground and eyed the beast.

The lion could make nothing of it. He walked forward a few mincing steps and tried to see out of his age-bleared eyes. To Eustace it appeared as though the animal was looking directly at him.

He quivered with apprehension. This, then, was the ultimate test. If the Androclean theory was correct——

He did not know that the lion could not see that far. All that he did know was that after gazing in his direction for a few moments, the lion settled down comfortably and prepared to go to sleep!

And then Eustace knew that victory was his. Back surged truant courage. Mister Androcles had indeed chronicled truly. Eustace felt that he and the lion were buddies. He turned and posed for the camera, waving his little sword majestically. Then he walked quite confidently toward the lion.

The lion blinked. There was something familiar about the approaching human: something which even the tin clothes could not entirely disguise. Eustace came closer—the lion did not move. The once-injured paw was slightly extended.

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Eustace was in the grip of exaltation. He was at peace with the world in general, and in particular with this lion. He was grateful to the paw which had enabled him to do the beast a favor. He dropped to one knee beside the animal and rested his hand affectionately on that paw.

And then the lion remembered!

The great body quivered, the jaws opened slowly, the muscles gathered for a spring. A roar shook the arena!

Mr. Eustace Gribble of Chicago took the hint. It required no unusual powers of perception to understand that the lion was exceedingly peeved and that his anger was directed against Eustace individually.

Fortunately Eustace's sword tripped him as he leaped away and the strangely active lion passed over the sprawling body. Mr. Gribble uttered a shriek of terror, scrambled to his feet and started traveling, the lion in earnest if rheumatic pursuit.

Now the spectators were on their feet, shrieking hysterically. Two women fainted. Orifice Latimer was held spellbound and the director was leaping up and down in a delirium of excitement and joy.

The cameraman cranked earnestly, swinging his machine this way and that to catch the mad,

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ecstatic chase around the tiny arena. Eustace's mail-clad legs were working like pistons, his feet kicking up puffs of sawdust as he smashed record after record.

The lion kept coming. His jaws were wide and dripping. His roars were of terrific volume. Eustace wanted to scream, but breath was too scarce just at that particular moment. His brain was in a turmoil—nothing which he owned was operating save his legs, his lungs and the instinct of self-preservation.

Around and around they whirled. And then, with a wild shriek, Eustace did the impossible. With a single leap he negotiated the arena wall. The lion tried valiantly—and missed. But Eustace did not know that the animal had failed.

Up the aisle he fled, his face white with fear. Over his shoulder he flung a parting word:

“Call him off, Cæsar—call him off. I resigns from your old company——”

He disappeared in a cloud of dust. The keeper sauntered into the arena and led the exhausted and docile lion away. J. Cæsar Clump turned to his chief.

“Well,” he remarked, “I guess Mistuh Gribble is just about passin’ Nashville by now.”

The crowd dispersed, jabbering excitedly. It had been a red-letter day. J. Cæsar Clump



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was enthusing vociferously over the comedy possibilities of the scene just filmed—"Best li'l ol' scene we ever has shot."

Some one joined the director and president. It was a little man, immaculately clad. J. Cæsar Clump slapped him enthusiastically on the back.

"Florian Slappey," he applauded, "you shuah has done what you promised!"

"Ain't it the truth?" grinned Florian. "But fo' a minute or two I thought maybe something had went wrong."

President Latimer dropped an affectionate hand on Florian's shoulder. "'Splain to us how you done it, Brother Slappey. Fust off, how you got Eustace to try it, an' secon'—what happened to that lion all of a sudden."

Florian explained graphically about Androcles and the lion, and then about Eustace's visit to the lion's cage for the purpose of extracting the thorn which the keeper had inserted. They listened raptly.

"But," questioned Orifice R. Latimer when Florian had finished, "wasn't you takin' a terrible chance?"

"How come?"

"S'pose this lion had been just like that other one—an' s'pose he had really got grateful to Eustace fo' takin' out that thorn?"

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A broad, beatific grin settled upon the face of Mr. Florian Slappey.

“Not a chance. You see that thorn which the keeper put in the lion’s foot an’ which Eustace yanked out wasn’t no thorn at all.”

“Not a thorn?” Latimer was dazed. “What was it?”

“That,” explained Mr. Florian Slappey triumphantly—“was a fish hook!”



### *VIII. Write and Wrong*

Semore Mashby stared across the aisle of the Jim Crow car with the hope of detecting a friendly gleam in the eyes of Lawyer Evans Chew.

Mr. Mashby was strangely alone in the midst of revelry and mirth. At Birmingham a dozen beaming colored men had boarded the Accommodation for Montgomery. They swept breezily into the car and appropriated it to their own enjoyment. They were gentlemen upon a holiday—temporarily bereft of care and trouble and family ties: they were the members of the Supreme Degree Team of Birmingham Lodge No. 17, The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise, and they trekked Montgomeryward to install a new lodge in that extensive order.

Chief among the merrymakers was Isaac Gethers, Grand Magnificent High Potentate; but the mantle of actual authority bedecked the broad and somewhat fleshy shoulders of Lawyer Evans Chew—Most Regal and Exalted High Counselor. Lawyer Chew gave ear to the festive jocularities of his fellow travelers and

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permitted an indulgent smile to crease his lips. But Chew himself was possessed of too vast a dignity to do more than signify his aloof and impersonal approval.

And so he sat in solitary state on one side of the aisle while little Semore Mashby—thin and hungry-looking and garbed in shiny clothes which had long since seen their best days—huddled opposite and hoped against hope that his eager glance might cause the suggestion of a friendly nod to agitate the Chew cranium.

Semore was a not unimportant member of the degree team and—ostensibly—was making the pilgrimage to Montgomery for the sole purpose of assisting a new lodge to take its place within the sacred confines of the order. The brethren who held this belief, however, were sadly in error. Not for the sake of fellow lodge members did Semore desert his musty little money-lending office on Eighteenth Street. Business beckoned him to Montgomery, a rare opportunity to make ten dollars grow where but one flourished before—and the installation of the new lodge had presented to him an opportunity for free transportation.

Ever since their departure from the dingy station in Birmingham, Semore had been attempting to summon the nerve to join Lawyer

Chew. Twice he actually had risen with that object in view—and each time lost his nerve and swayed uncertainly down the aisle to the water cooler. Now, however, he was becoming desperate; and desperation begot an idea.

From an inner pocket he took a sheet of salmon-pink paper, liberally sprinkled with black type. Then he drew himself to a full five-two of attenuated height, crossed the car and boldly plumped himself alongside the ponderous and goggled dean of Birmingham's colored legal brotherhood.

An expression of frank distaste settled upon the Chevian countenance. He moved as though to rise, but Semore placed a gently restraining hand upon his arm.

"Just a minute, Brother Chew; I craves to make talk with you."

Chew favored him with a frosty look. "I assuah you, Mistuh Mashby, that yo' craving is not mutual."

"Aw! Now listen—they ain't no need of us fussin' at each other all the time, is there?"

"Hmm! I don't know as I see any objection to said fussing hereinbefore mentioned. Frankly, Mistuh Mashby, the happiest I am in yo' sassiety is when you happen to be somewhere else."

"I just wanted to 'scuss some business——"

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He unfolded the sheet of salmon-pink. "By the way, has you saw'n this yet, Lawyer Chew?"

The vivid color attracted the eye of the attorney. The big black type riveted his attention. He read:

DO YOU WANT TO WIN \$250 CASH MONEY  
WRITE A SCENARIO  
NO BRAINS REQUIRED—THIS MEANS YOU!  
MIDNIGHT PICTURES CORPORATION, Inc.

Birmingham's Own Colored Pictures Producing Company offers a cash prize of \$250 for the best two-reel comedy synopsis furnished by a boney fide resident of this city by May first. Just outline your story. Grammar don't count. We want ideas and we pays for same. \$250 in solid gold money will be publicly paid to the winner. Come one—come all. No entrance fee required.

The judges will be:

ORIFICE R. LATIMER,  
President of Midnight.  
J. CAESAR CLUMP,  
Our Able Picture Director.  
SEMORE MASHBY,  
Birmingham Financial Wizzid.

Semore bent forward eagerly as Chew perused the document to its bitter conclusion. The little man placed a skinny forefinger upon

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the words "financial wizzid" and his thin voice tremoloed with pride.

"That," he proclaimed, "is I!"

Chew was both impressed and surprised. "What you know 'bout scenarios, Semore?"

"Huh! I guess I know a lot of things."

"I guess you guess you do. But just the same it don't make sense that they should selec' you fo' a judge. I s'pose just 'cause you is a stockholder in their comp'ny——"

"I 'splained to 'em I was anxious to do 'em good. You see, Brother Chew——" and Mashby grew terribly earnest, for this was the matter of business which had caused him to desire conversation with the lawyer—"you see, I feels right sentimental 'bout this heah Midnight Pitcher Company, it bein' Bumminham cullud folks an' ev'ything—an' I has been tellin' Brother Latimer that any time he needs any he'p——"

"—To call on you, huh? Well, so long as I is regalarly constituted an' properly vested attorney at law fo' the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., which same I is in law an' in fact—I ain't gwine give them no advice to call on you fo' he'p."

"But, Brother Chew—you does me injustice. Affection fo' that company is the one thing I ain't got nothin' else but."

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"Pff! Words whàt you utters."

"They is honest-to-gosh true. Just to prove it—lemme tell you I has found out what a hole they is in right now, an' I is willin' to assist 'em out."

"What hole who is in?"

"Midnight Pitchers Corporation, Inc."

"Who says they is in a hole?"

"I do."

"How come?"

"Well—as legal counsel fo' that comp'ny you sho'ly ought to know that their lease on that ol' warehouse which they is usin' fo' a studjo ain't got on'y four mo' months to run: ain't that so?"

Chew nodded, but said nothing. His eyes narrowed slightly and his ears tilted the least bit. The brain which had made Lawyer Evans Chew a foremost power in Birmingham's colored civic life was functioning at top speed. Of course he knew about the dire and immediate problem by which Midnight was confronted.

"I don't know much 'bout their leases, Se-more."

"Maybe not. Anyway: at the end of four mo' months they has got to git out of that warehouse or else pay a terrible big rent which the ol' barn ain't wuth. Also, if they remains

where they is at, they is gwine haf to sign a five-yeah lease—an' that, Brother Chew, woul'n't be nothin' short of plumb foolishment."

"Why you think that?"

"I don't think it—I knows it. I reckon I ain't a financial wizzid fo' nothin'——"

"You said it, Brother!"

"—An' I guess I know a thing or two 'bout how successful Midnight is gittin' to be. Pretty near a hund'ed an' fifty fust-run pitcher houses all over the country showin' Midnight Comedies, an' they a'ready signed up fo' twenty-six pitchers a yeah fo' two more yeahs after the next fo' months is ended. Ain't that all true?"

"Yeh. You, bein' a stockholder, are acquainted with all that—so it ain't no use fo' me to tell you diff'ent."

"Well now—just look how fast they has grew in the last eight months. Stahtin' with nothin', they has mo' than doubled themse'ves—an' they is gittin' richer an' prosperouser ev'y day. Inside a yeah they is gwine have outgrew that ol' warehouse: it ain't hahdly big enough fo' em' now—an' they hardly got no yard a tall. What Midnight needs, Lawyer Chew, is expansion."

"Uh-huh. You suttinly 'pears to be pro-

## *Bigger and Blacker*

nunciating wisdom, Semore.” Chew was adroitly drawing the little man out. “Now s’pose you ’splain to me what swell ideas you has got fo’ the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc.?”

“This: What that comp’ny needs is to find some real, ginuwine financial wizzid—like me, fo’ instance—which is willin’ to lease ’em a big lot fo’ ’bout five yeahs at a small rental, an’ build ’em a big studjo on same, ’cawdin’ to their own specifications. Then they will have ev’y-thing like they want it an’ nothin’ to worry about.”

“Fumadiddles! Was they cravin’ that kind of a plant, Semore, why woul’n’t they build it their own se’ve’s?”

“Two reasons,” snapped Mr. Mashby triumphantly. “One is that they ain’t got the money. Oh, I know!—they ain’t declared no dividends yet ’cause they ain’t paid themse’ves back fo’ the money which was invested original an’ which was all borried. An’ also, they ain’t crazy to sink how much capital it would take to build the right sort of a studjo. Of course, if they could wait a yeah, what you argues hol’s good an’ they would build their own—but right now they ain’t got the money n’r neither the enthusiasm. Ain’t that a fact?”

Chew inclined his head slightly. “I ain’t

sayin' 'tis or 'tain't. But it does listen reasonable. Now s'pose you tell me why you informs me of all this?"

"Because," replied Mashby candidly, "you is their legal adwiser, an' what you says pretty well goes. An' I was figgerin' that did I convince you, you would make them see that the best thing they could do would be to sign up with me an' leave me build 'em a studjo on my lot out near Tittisville."

"An' you propose that I elucidate to them that they should enter into this deal with you. Is that it?"

"'Tain't nothin' else."

"An' the rent you would charge?"

"We-e-ell——" Semore hedged. "I'd have to look after myse'f. Now look heah——" He produced from an inner pocket an elaborate set of figures. With grimy forefinger he indicated certain salient totals to Lawyer Evans Chew, that erudite gentleman giving him close attention. And then, when Semore had thoroughly aroused Chew's attention, he casually mentioned the rental which he would accept.

For an instant Lawyer Evans Chew sat in stunned silence. Then he turned upon his companion eyes in which amazement vied with disbelief. "Goodness Goshness, Miss Agnes,

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Semore Mashby—has you gone plumb crazy in yo' haid?"

"What you mean: crazy?"

"Them rentals! You must think I is non compos mental does you believe I would advise Midnight to sign any such of a lease."

"They got to have a new studjo," persisted Semore stubbornly; "an' they ain't in no position to put out the cash it would take to build."

"Also they ain't in no position to han' you no mint. What you ain't got in yo' haid, Semore, is no brains—tryin' to stick folks thataway. Now s'posin' we see what you really will assept?"

"Them's my figgers!" snapped Mr. Mashby. "An' time ain't gwine make 'em grow no smaller."

He rose, gathered up his papers, and returned to his seat. Semore did not do business in an impulsive manner and had not anticipated immediate endorsement of his scheme. But he knew that he had planted seed in fertile ground. Of course he wouldn't get the very figure he asked, but it was not beyond possibility that he would receive something very close to it. In a year at the outside Midnight would require larger quarters—they were already too large for the warehouse which sheltered them—and Semore had it on good au-

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thority that the owners of that warehouse were contemplating a bit of high and mighty profiteering when the date for renewing the lease rolled around.

The far-flung outskirts of Montgomery came into view: the train screeched for occasional crossings. Passengers, somewhat worn by the journey, commenced collecting baggage for the exodus—and the dozen members of the degree team prepared to be received in state.

At length the train groaned to a protesting halt under the smoke-grimed shed. Headed by Isaac Gethers and Lawyer Evans Chew, the delegation alighted and passed through the waiting room. At the curb there awaited a large and very brass band which blared forth in fierce cacophony the welcoming strains of "Linger Awhile." The delegation was completely surrounded and marched in state toward the modest hostelry where rooms had been engaged.

Arrangements were made to call for them in autos at seven-thirty that night. In the meantime, plans for entertainment of the visiting dignitaries had been made by prominent Montgomery Afro-Americans. All of these invitations were accepted save the one extended Lawyer Evans Chew. That gentleman clipped the end from a fragrant cigar, waved an impor-



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tant hand and announced that he had some legal business to attend to. "Settlement of an estate," he proclaimed majestically. "Testator is dead and left a last will an' testimony which I has been seeking to adjust fo' some time. I aims to go out an' visit a couple of the heirs which live here. 'Pawtant matter—awful 'pawtant."

Fifteen minutes later the attorney was en route to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Lijah Whittle, colored. He reclined in the tonneau of a taxicab and viewed Montgomery with benign approval. Nor was he unconscious of the fact that he was regarded with considerable interest by several members of the colored feminine gender whom he happened to pass.

He was a not unimposing figure as he lolled against the upholstery. His tailored clothes were in the latest mode. In color they were a delicate pearl-gray—with felt hat and knitted tie to match. He wore tan shoes and white spats and carried in his gloved left hand the other glove and a heavy cane. Connecting horn-rimmed glasses with his right ear was a heavy black cord, and from the breast pocket of his pearly coat peeped the lavender border of a silk handkerchief.

The distance was greater than Chew had anticipated, but the afternoon was balmy and the

drive soothing. The car swung out of the main residential section and thence toward the country. It eventually came to a stop before the gaping gate of an unpainted cottage set well back behind a group of spreading oaks.

Chew alighted, ordered the driver to wait, and approached the house. He employed his most impressive stride, mammoth figure moving grandiloquently toward the dilapidated veranda which spanned the front of the house. And as he approached, his eyes missed no single detail of the confusion which was evident within.

It was quite plain that the occupants of the house were preparing to depart for somewhere—and to do it soon and completely. Packing cases were here, there and everywhere; excelsior was scattered about and old newspapers were present in profusion. Chew nodded contentedly: If Mr. and Mrs. Lijah Whittle were positively leaving, then the chances were they would settle for the slightly smaller amount Chew had decided to offer.

But first he wanted to be sure. Keeping his eyes focused on a window, he started to circle the house. He walked proudly, purposefully and sturdily. And because of his prideful manner, he did not see the old watering trough which lay directly across his path.

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His first intimation that there was any such obstacle came when his right ankle hooked very neatly on the edge of the trough. The pain was instant and sharp. Chew jerked away—and the other foot caught.

For a split second he fought to maintain a balance. He teetered uncertainly—and then, quite without warning, seated himself squashily in the very middle of the trough.

“Whooooosh!” Goggles tumbled off: cane danced away. Chew struggled wildly, conscious only of the fact that his trousers—and that portion of him which the trousers concealed—were very, very wet. And then, to make his dilemma more embarrassing, there appeared on the back porch a not uncomely young lady of mahogany complexion.

This person stared wide-eyed at the tableau. Then she placed ample hands on rounded hips and gave way to a paroxysm of mirth. Her merriment beat upon Chew’s eardrums like direst insult, and he raised his voice:

“Who you laughin’ at, woman?”

“You—tha’s who! Oh! My golly! How come you ever to pick out that ol’ trough to sit down in?”

“I didn’t pick it out. I di’n’t even know it was there.” He elevated himself with considerable effort and stood regarding her angrily.

Then he glanced down at the wreck of his pearl-gray trousers. They were in a sad condition; the water running from them in little rivulets. A groan escaped from between the learned lips.

"Ruint!" he moaned. "An' I ain't got one other single pant closer than Bumminham!"

Mrs. Whittle came closer. "What town you mentioned?"

"Bumminham."

"Is you fum there?"

"I is—an' my name is Lawyer Evans Chew."

For a moment she stared, a twinkle still lurking in her eyes. "Golly!" she murmured at length. "I never espected you would look like this."

"Nor neither did I. An' now——" He looked down upon the wreck of his raiment. "What is I gwine do? Heah I is in a strange town an' ain't got ary garment to take the place of these wet ones. An' bein' gray——"

"S'posin' I lend you one of my husban's pants?"

"Leave me see 'em."

The pants were disclosed. Chew politely tried to conceal the extent of his distaste. "Reckon them woul'n't blend with my coat awful good, Mis' Whittle."

The eyes of the dusky lady brightened.

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"Tell you what I'll do, Lawyer Chew. You go into the spare room an' han' them pants out to me. I dries 'em off an' presses 'em good, an' they woul'n't hahdly nobody know anything was wrong."

Chew agreed with alacrity, and while the good housewife busied herself in the drying process, Chew discussed matters with her through the doorway.

"You-all leavin' Mon'gomery, Mis' Whittle?"

"Yassuh—an' I don't mean maybe."

"Where to is you goin'?"

"St. Looey."

"All packed up, ain't you?"

"Pretty near. We was aimin' to depaht as soon as we gotten that money offen you." She glanced through the front door. "Heah comes Lijah. I bet he's gwine be s'prised."

Lawyer Evans Chew gazed upon the massive figure of the approaching husband and then at his own condition of pronounced dishabille. He was inclined to agree that Lijah would be surprised and for an instant fear twitched his heart. But Lijah accepted his wife's explanation without question and immediately entered the room and introduced himself.

To Lijah, Lawyer Chew explained certain circumstances. From his wallet he extracted a

number of yellow-backed twenty-dollar bills, which he spread enticingly on the table.

"Tha's two hund'ed dollars less than us ought to get," growled Lijah.

"Nossuh." Chew was prepared to argue. "It's on'y two hund'ed dollars less than you thought you was gwine get. Anyhow, tha's all what the zecutors authorize an' empower me to offer yo'se'f an' legally wedded wife, an' if you don't take same now, why, I reckon it means a law suit in the co'ts of this noble an' sov'eign State, which mos' prob'ly means that yo' money will git tied up fo' two or th'ee yeahs."

In the next room, Mrs. Lijah Whittle was becoming interested in the conversation. She forgot her job and sidled toward the door where she might miss no detail of the negotiations.

"Wha's Lawyer Chew tryin' to do, Lijah?"

"Make us take two hund'ed dollars less than——"

"Don't do it. Us gits all or nothin'."

"Nothin', then," interjected Chew suavely.

"Reckon that suits the zecutors pretty good."

Sight of the money was having its effect upon Lijah Whittle. He had planned to exodust immediately, and the prospect of having payment withheld for two years was not alluring.



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"Seems like to me——" he started, then broke off suddenly and sniffed the atmosphere. "Wha's that I smell burnin'?" he inquired.

"Burnin'!" A shriek escaped from the lips of Mrs. Whittle. "Oh, Lawsy—it's Lawyer Chew's pants!"

Lijah bolted into the next room and removed the sadiron from the unoffending trousers. His wife surveyed the smoking ruins of the once-proud pants and wrung her hands with grief. Lawyer Evans Chew stared through the partly opened doorway.

Lijah grasped the trousers firmly by the belt straps and held them aloft. The front was not at all affected, but the hindmost portion had been considerably less fortunate. The red-hot sadiron, left perched upon the seat of the trousers, had worked not wisely but very well indeed. Quite cleanly and clearly it had burned its own image where only a very long frock coat could hope to conceal it. The erudite attorney from Birmingham expressed his opinion of Mrs. Lijah Whittle in no uncertain terms, and that lady tearfully endorsed everything he said.

"An' now," groaned Lawyer Chew, "what can a pantless man do when he has got to 'stall a lodge?"

It was a poser. Again Lijah's trousers were



offered, and again declined. "Better my own with a hole in 'em than Lijah's without nothin'. I ain't so crazy 'bout Mistuh Whittle's style."

At length it was decided that Mrs. Whittle would do her best at patching the damage. And while she was laboring industriously, the couple accepted the money which Lawyer Chew had brought, a release was signed and the deal closed definitely and finally.

"Us removes ourse'ves away from Mon'gom'ry pretty soon now," vouchsafed Mr. Whittle. "We craves to see what the Nawth looks like."

The dusky lady handed the pants through the door. Her work as a seamstress was not bad, but pants and patch did not blend. Chew grumbled:

"Secon' in command of that degree team an' Ise got to conduc' all them ceremonies sittin' down. Else git laughed at. Ain't never gwine travel again 'thout carryin' some spare pants. It's gwine be all right when I comes on the stage, but what happens when I walks off?"

He said his good-bys and joined his taxi-driver. All the way back into the center of the city he was wracking his brain for a solution to the problem.

The cool gray of evening was turned swiftly into velvet night. Lawyer Chew consulted his

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watch and uttered an exclamation of horror: thirty minutes before lodge meetin'! He reached the hotel, ordered sandwiches sent up to his room—and while making ready was visited by Potentate Isaac Gethers, Semore Mashby and Doctor Brutus Herring. They demanded to know where he had been and why he was keeping them waiting. Chew hemmed and hawed and tried to evade the issue, but the keen eyes of Semore Mashby detected the ravages of fire and water upon the pearl-gray pants.

"Great sufferin' tripe!" he ejaculated. "What has yo' pants been doin', Lawyer Chew?"

"What you mean—doin'?"

Semore circled Chew, and motioned the others to join him. "All blacked up like you gotten 'em wet—an' a big hole sort of burned in."

"Well," snarled Chew. "They *was* burnt!"

"An' was you in them pants at the time?"

"No, Foolish. Co'se I wasn't. You reckon I would leave somebody come along an' burn me like that?"

Semore was persistence itself.

"Where'd you go this afternoon?"

"Drivin'."

"How come you to take yo' pants off?"

Chew's brain worked swiftly. This would never do: best thing for him was to make a clean breast of it—confess that the joke was on him and let the others have a good time. So he smiled ruefully and retailed the story of his disastrous visit to the Whittles' home; of the swim in the watering trough and the subsequent scorching of his trousers. He made it as funny as he could and they laughed heartily—and then he pledged them all to secrecy.

"You-all is my frien's," he pleaded, "an' you has had yo' fun offen me. Suttinly there ain't no use making me ridiculum befo' ev'ybody in Bumminham, is there?"

"No suh!" Brutus Herring was very positive.

"They shuah ain't!" echoed Isaac Gethers.

They turned upon Semore Mashby. "How 'bout you?"

"Me? Golly, I woul'n't go 'barrassing Lawyer Chew fo' nothin'."

Chew thanked them with tears in his eyes, and it was agreed amongst them that he would explain the hole in his trousers by blaming it on the hotel pressing shop.

The Montgomery officers swallowed the story without a wink. They not only did not make it a subject for jocularitv, but were exceedingly regretful that a visiting lodge officer

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should have been treated so disrespectfully by any local pants presser. They assured him that they would be delighted to make good his loss—but he waved an insouciant hand.

“Shux, no! Wha’s one pair of pants more or less between lodge brothers?”

The new Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise lodge was installed amid much revelry and enthusiasm. Immediately after the ceremony a large and earnest dance was held; a saxophone band furnishing the music. Early the following morning the Birmingham delegation returned to the Magic City where Lawyer Chew’s car was waiting at the train and he was driven home in the privacy of its tonneau.

Meanwhile, in Chew’s brief absence from the city, a new sensation had shaken colored society to its foundations. Throwaways similar to that which had been shown to Chew by Semore Mashby on the train had been generally distributed and the itch for authorship had infected slightly more than one hundred percent of the dusky populace.

The Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., had agreed not only to pay two hundred and fifty dollars in gold to the author of the best two-reel comedy synopsis, but had contracted further to make an actual production of that picture with the author’s name displayed in

large letters. There appeared to be not a man, woman or child in the city who didn't know at least one good situation, and from the second day of the contest the judges were swamped with manuscripts of more or less startling degrees of impossibility.

Stories, stories, stories—some of them bad and some terrible: they came with letters assuring the judges that they must be good because they were taken from real life. Orifice R. Lati-mer and J. Cæsar Clump gazed at each other across the stacks of mail and wondered whether, after all, they had not been a bit hasty in bringing this deluge of labor upon themselves.

As for Semore Mashby, that gentleman was taking things easy. His presence on the board of judges had been for the sole and simple purpose of representing the general public as a guarantee of genuineness. So the skinny little man strutted through the excitement, preening himself on his newly acquired dignity and permitting all and sundry to fawn upon him in the attempt to cause him to become more favorably inclined to their particular manuscript.

Since returning from Montgomery, Semore had again tried to interest the Midnight officials in his proposition for the erection of a new

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studio. They referred him to Lawyer Evans Chew.

"He's our legal counsel, an' does he say it is a good thing, us considers it. Otherwise—not."

Chew proved no more responsive than he had been on the Montgomery-bound train. He agreed that the proposition was basically sound, but impossible of consideration at the rent suggested by the attenuated financier. And Semore refused to lower his asking price by so much as a single copper cent.

But his stubbornness masked a considerable worry. He regarded the proposition as excellent from his standpoint, and he knew that the hour was imminent when Midnight must make definite arrangements for another year's housing. He retired into his musty, dingy office and gave himself over to a protracted period of intensive thought. He emerged from this brief confinement with his lean face crinkled into a grin, and made his way immediately and triumphantly to the offices of Lawyer Evans Chew on the seventh floor of the Penny Prudential Bank Building.

The chocolate-cream stenographer informed the visitor that Lawyer Chew was, at the moment, in conference, but would be free in half an hour. Semore elected to wait. And forty

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minutes later he greeted the ponderous and portly attorney as that gentleman looked up from the pages of a volume of American and English Annotated Cases and informed Semore that he was busy on matters of importance.

Chew exuded learning and dignity, but for once Mr. Mashby was not impressed.

"I has come to make talk with you," he started.

Chew frowned. "Ise busy an' my time is vallible. I is gatherin' data on a replevin case which has been brought to me, which the facts of same——"

"This is a pussonal matter," suggested Semore mildly.

"If it's some more about that Midnight lease, then you might's well not th'ow good breff after bad."

"'Tain't about that, Lawyer Chew. It's about this heah scenario contest which I is a judge of."

Chew straightened: a lavender flush of anger crossed his forehead. "How come you to bother me with yo' scenario contest? I ain't got no time to truck with such as that."

"I asks yo' legal 'pinion. It's about me writin' a story fo' that contes'."

"You cain't do it. You is a judge."

"But s'pose I signs a friend's name to it?"



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"I reckon if you done that——"

"This is the swellest story yet." Semore waxed enthusiastic. "It stahts this-away——"

The lawyer rose and pounded a fleshy fist upon the near-mahogany desk top. "I ain't gwine listen to no stories."

"You is interested in this one, Lawyer Chew. An' I mean positivel."

Chew detected the fire gleam in Semore's eyes and instinct prompted him to be seated. "Shoot!" he commanded.

Semore's thin, high-pitched voice cut through the room.

"It's a story 'bout a big fat lawyer all dressed up in a gray suit which gits to a town where he don't live, an' goes to see a swell-lookin' gal on business. This heah lawyer in the story is gwine have an awful jealous wife. Now, when he gits to see this noble-lookin' lady client, he trips an' falls into a waterin' trough an' pretty near ruins his nice, gray pants."

Chew was leaning forward tensely. There was no doubting that his attention was caught. A murderous light was in his eyes as he murmured a harsh, "Go on!"

"Well," continued Semore smoothly, "this lady puts the fat lawyer into another room an' takes his pants th'oo the door an' starts pressin'

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'em, an' while doin' so she burns a hole in 'em with a flatiron, an' then the pants is ruint sho' nuff."

Mr. Mashby paused for a moment; then he went on, checking off salient details on his fingers: "Now this lady has got a jealous husban' which is libel to kill any feller which even looks cross-eyed at his good-lookin' wife, an' this husband ain't home. But he's comin' home——"

"Tha's a lie!" snapped Chew. "Mistuh Lijah Whittle an' me is good frien's."

"Who said somethin' 'bout you? I don't even know yet what is the name of the lawyer in the story. Anyway, this husban' comes in the door an' sees them pants an' he says to his wife, 'Wife,' he says, 'what is you doin' with whose pants?' Well, she esplains to him an' the lawyer is listenin' th'oo the do', an' all of a sudden the husban' grabs them pants an' lets out a yell, an' as he goes bustin' in the door, the lawyer grabs him a bedspread an' flies out the winder."

Semore's voice trailed off. He allowed himself a broad, happy grin. Chew was staring in transfixed horror: the cunning of the little man's scheme was beginning to strike home.

"Cain't you see how funny that is gwine look in movin' pitchers?" murmured Mr. Mashby.

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"That fat dignified lawyer scootin' 'cross lots an' th'oo valleys with a bedspread wropped aroun' his laigs, an' the husban' chasin' after him, wavin' them pants? Man, it's gwine make ev'ybody which sees it just bust themse'ves laughin'.

"An' now comes the paht that makes it a swell story: see? The lawyer in the pitcher is scared to death an' he falls in ditches an' gits stuck on fences an' all like that, an' finely, when he cain't run no mo' on account he has lost his breff, he falls down on the grass an' waits fo' the husban' to come up an' sterminate him. There he lies an' up comes the husban'—an' the lawyer looks up at him an' says, 'Mister,' he says, 'you is about to make a terrible mistake—but you better go ahead an' kill me now an' git it done with.' The husban' looks down at him. 'Kill you?' he asks. 'Whaffo'?' With that the lawyer kinder groans—an' I conten's that this is funny pitcher stuff: 'Well, if you ain't gwine kill me, what has you been chasin' me fo'?' Fo' a minute the husban' looks at him an' then he busts out laughin'. 'What has I been chasin' you fo'?' he questions. 'Why, what do you think? I wanted to give you back yo' pants!' "

The voice of the little man trailed off and for a few moments the office was filled with silence.

It was Semore who resumed the conversation:

"Now I has sawn a heap of the stories which has been submitted, Lawyer Chew—an' they ain't ary one of 'em which would make as good a two-reel pitcher as that one. It's a puffec'ly wonderful plot, an' it has got a big laugh on the end which is what J. Cæsar Clump says we always ought to have. An' I is suah that if that story was to be sent in an' I was to read it an' vote fo' it enthusiastic an' show it pussonal to them other judges—it would come awful close to winnin' the prize. An' even if it didn't—it suttinly is good enough to git assepted an' produced as a pitcher some other time. Now I asts you: What has you got to say about it?"

Chew glared. "I calls it a dirty, rotten trick—tha's what. I thought you promised in Mon'gom'ry you never would tell nobody 'bout me gittin' my pants burned."

"This ain't *tellin'* nobody, is it? An' besides, who says it was you?"

"Well—other folks know I got a hole burned in my trousers an' the minute they was to read that scenario or look at the pitcher, they'd know I was the feller which was meant. An' not on'y they'd staht thinkin' things, but also my wife would raise thunder."

"Shuh! I ain't studyin' 'bout Mis' Chew."

"You ain't ma'ied to her, tha's why."

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Semore rubbed his hands together unctuously. "What you think of my story, Brother Chew?"

"It's all one big lie—tha's what I think about it."

"Well—it's a good story, an' is it assepted I cain't he'p it if folks git the idea I took the whole thing fum real life."

Chew rose and walked to the window where he stood looking down upon the welter of traffic which choked Eighteenth Street. Darktown's Broadway was urgent with life and merriment; street cars clanged around corners and auto sirens shrieked imperiously.

The broad back of the lawyer was toward his visitor. Pudgy, heavily ringed hands were clasped earnestly. The brown forehead was furrowed with horizontal lines of worry.

Chew was of a sufficiently judicial turn of mind to grasp immediately the cunning of Semore Mashby's scheme. The strongest part of it all was that the story would make a howlingly funny picture—something which could not be said for ninety-nine percent of the scripts which were being submitted in the contest. And with Semore himself approving it and bringing it enthusiastically to the attention of the other judges, the chances were all

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in favor of its being declared winner of the first prize.

Chew wished now that he had told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Of course, it would have made him seem rather ridiculous, but after all, a joke told on oneself loses much of its sting.

He did not delude himself as to the power for damage lying in Mashby's proposed synopsis. He was willing to wager that, good friends as Isaac Gethers and Doctor Brutus Herring were, they had told their wives in strictest secrecy of his absurd plight in Montgomery. It might even have come to the ears of the gossipy and acid-tongued Sis Callie Flukers. And of course Mrs. Chew knew about the burned trousers.

If then these damning circumstances should be screened it would generally be accepted that, since part of Lawyer Chew's story was unquestionably untrue—the rest must be tainted with falsity. What could be easier then than to believe the whole thing? And Lawyer Chew shuddered at thought of what Mrs. Chew would say, should she believe the whole of the ridiculous fabrication.

He swung grimly back upon Semore Mashby.

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"What's yo' price fo' not submittin' this story, Semore?"

Mr. Mashby smirked ingratiatingly. "I ain't said I come up heah to make a trade with you. I just thought you might be interested in my authoring."

"I am." Grimly. "Now—what is it?"

"We-e-ell, I ain't never ceased thinking that it would be a pow'ful fine deal fo' Midnight if they was to leave me build a new studjo fo' em."

"At yo' rental?"

"Uh-huh. On a five-yeah lease."

"Nothin' doin'. Absotively not a thing."

"Tha's yo' business, Lawyer Chew. I'll be trottin' along. Got a heap of work to do on that story of mine."

Chew did some quick thinking. "When does that contest close, Semore?"

"Saddy night. 'Nouncement is to be made nex' We'nesday."

Wednesday! Owners of the present studio property were demanding an answer by Friday. Chew spoke crisply. "Don't do nothin' 'bout that story until you heah fum me ag'in, Semore."

"I don't see——"

"Well, I do. Promise?"



"All right. Until Chuesday. But remember, I ain't tryin' to hol' you up."

"No—you ain't. You woul'n't dream of doin' nothin' like that."

Mashby departed, leaving the attorney in a ferment of doubt and unrest. A great soggy cloud of gloom was drifting across his horizon, headed straight in his direction.

The more he dwelt upon the potentialities of Semore's scheme, the more certain he became that he would be forced to accept Mr. Mashby's terms. It was a straight holdup, of course—but Semore's lack of ethics made his own dilemma none the less embarrassing.

"Golly Moses!" he muttered. "If on'y I had tol' that story on myse'f, heah in Bumminham, 'stead of untruthing about part of it—nobody would of thought nothin'. Now if it gits completely loose, ev'ybody is gwine to think the whole business is true!"

For the balance of the day Lawyer Chew abandoned business in favor of speculation on his own situation. He realized that he was strictly up against it and the prospect was far from alluring.

He took his problem home with him and spent the evening in tall and fancy thinking. At nine-thirty he crawled between the sheets,

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still pondering, and when he dozed off an hour later the problem remained unsolved.

At two o'clock he waked suddenly and sat up straight in bed. His teeth gleamed through the darkness. His lips framed words of exultation.

"Hot diggity dawg!" he exclaimed. "Ise got it!"

Mrs. Chew questioned drowsily. "What you got, Evans?"

The brain of the attorney was working at top speed. Determination crystallized and he crawled out of bed and into his bathrobe. He disappeared into the kitchen and twenty minutes later returned to the bedroom with a cup of steaming coffee.

He roused his wife. "Drink this," he commanded.

"Whaffo' I should drink coffee at ha'f pas' two o'clock in the mawnin'?"

"I craves to git you wide awake. I got an idea to talk over."

The coffee effectively drove sleep from the wifely eyes. She sat up while Chew, encased in his gloriously hued dressing gown, paced the floor and told her the true story of his Montgomery disaster. She gave close attention.

"You b'lieve me, don't you, honey?"

Mrs. Chew nodded: she was a woman of considerable wisdom and sensed that something vital was transpiring. Also she had been married to Evans Chew a sufficient number of years to know when he spoke truthfully and when he did not. Of course this was a golden opportunity to become caustic—but instinct warned her that great events were about to occur.

“Yeh—I b’lieve you, Evans. Preceed.”

He proceeded. He told of Semore Mashby’s Machiavellian scheme to use him against the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc., and of the Damoclean sword which was suspended above his dignified head.

“But, Evans, what you got to worry about? You has tol’ me an’ I know Semore’s scenario ain’t true, so——”

“Tha’s fine about you, honey-chile. But I has got a position in Bumminham which has got to be maintained. Folks has got to know that I is a he-wife of Cæsar, which means that they mustn’t suspec’ me of nothin’ which ain’t open an’ above the board. Now you know good as me, that does Semore’s scenario win the prize, folks is gwine be glad to think that it is all true, specially when they knows that half of it is true. An’ the minute they git the idea that when I goes away on business trips, I gal-

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livants aroun' an' gits into trouble with ladies' husban's—Ise ruint. Plumb, absotively ruint! Ain't that a fack?"

Mrs. Chew inclined her head in agreement. "You shuah does speak wisdom, Evans. But what can us do? You sho'ly ain't gwine let Semore Mashby git away with that contrack, is you?"

"No, ma'am. Tha's one thing I woul'n't never do. What Lawyer Evans Chew has got is ethics, an' lots of 'em. Also I detests to git helt up. Now heah's my idea: Minute this scenario gits chose, folks is gwine think terrible things about me an' Montgomery—unless——"

"Unless which?"

"Unless we does somethin' to prove that they coul'n't be right, even if they was. Now it just struck me that Mistuh an' Mis' Whittle is about due to be leavin' Mon'gom'ry fo' St. Louis, an' if they was to stop in Bumminham en root an' be the house gues's of Lawyer an' Mis' Evans Chew, an' if we was all to go to the 'nouncement together, I reckon there coul'n't nobody say nothing had ever been wrong between us, could they?"

Mrs. Chew nodded sagely. "Tha's right, Evans; that shuah is right. You suttinly does

use yo' haid fo' somethin' more than just to give yo' hat a rest."

Bright and early the following morning, Lawyer Chew journeyed to Montgomery. When he returned it was with Mr. and Mrs. Lijah Whittle. They were both dazed and delighted at this signal attention and they fairly reveled in the luxury of the Chews' guest room.

"Heah they is," announced Chew to his wife, in the privacy of their room. "An' now we'll leave Mistuh Mashby do his durndest."

"We suttinly will. An' Evans—they ain't so bad, either."

"Not a bit," agreed Evans heartily. "Only a li'l' bit dumb."

News that there were visitors at the Chew residence reached Semore through Florian Slappey.

"Swell-lookin' gal an' her husban' visitin' the Chews," announced Florian.

"What their name is?"

"Whittle."

"That don't mean nothin' to me. Where at is they fum?"

"I dunno. But she sho'llly ain't hard to look at, I'm tellin' you. Pussonally, I wisht she wa'n't ma'ied."

Semore gave the matter scant attention at the moment. But the day following he re-

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ceived a summons from Lawyer Chew. He visited the attorney at the latter's office and stood meekly while Evans Chew hurled anathema upon his head for daring to think that he might, even for one single instant, contemplate double-crossing the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. Semore was dazed:

"Jus' a minute, Lawyer Chew: just one li'l teeny minute. Does I correc'ly understan' that you *ain't* gwine advise Midnight to assept my offer?"

"Yo' comprehension is imminently correct. An' fu'thermo'——"

Mr. Mashby was enormously crestfallen.

"Nemmin' no furthermo's, Lawyer Chew." Slow anger was mounting within his bosom. He raised to the face of the attorney beady eyes which were glittering with anger. Tha's all right fo' you—I reckon there ain't nothin' fo' me to do but go out an' author me a story about a feller gittin' his pants burned an' chased by a jealous husban' because."

"Go ahaid," counseled Chew airily. "Make it two pants if you like. Trousers ain't nothin' in my young life."

"Tha's what you think. But when folks gits to understan' that this means you——"

"Git out of my office, Semore Mashby, befo' I th'ows you out!"

Semore paused at the door for a Parthian shot: "All right, Ol' Burn-Pants! You wait! Unless you comes to me pretty quick with yo' mind all changed, that story is gwine win fust prize."

Mr. Mashby was considerably perturbed as he descended to the ground floor of the all-negro skyscraper. It had not been beyond the realm of possibility that Lawyer Chew would advise Midnight against dealing with him at his price—but he most certainly could not understand the ebony barrister's aggressive independence. That betokened an indifference which Brother Mashby could not understand.

Semore knew what havoc his scenario would play should it win first prize, and he knew that Lawyer Chew knew it. Therefore, by all the rules, Lawyer Chew should be apprehensive—and this he most certainly was not.

It occurred to Mr. Mashby that there was a colored brother concealed in the cordwood and he set his small but agile brain to work. Lawyer Chew had a plan—perhaps—Semore's memory flashed back to Florian's casual mention of visitors at the Chew home. Instantly he turned his steps in the direction of Sis Callie Flukers' respectable boarding house.

Sis Callie was very much at home. Thin and eager and acid-tongued, she was quite ex-



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cited over Semore's visit. Mr. Mashby did not mince words.

"Folks named Whittle visitin' over at the Chewses, Sis Callie."

"Ain't it so?"

"Seems kind of queer to me nobody knows nothin' 'bout who they is or where fum."

"Shuh!" Sis Callie was all a-flutter. "You talks foolishment with yo' mouf, Brother Mashby. I knows who they is an' where they come fum."

"Well——?"

"Their names is Mistuh an' Mis' Lijah Whittle an' they comes fum Mon'gom'ry an' just recent Lawyer Chew was down there to see 'em 'bout settlin' up an estate, an' I has heard that they burned his pants fo' him an'——"

Unquestionably Sis Callie was worthy of her reputation. Semore departed, marveling at her acquisitive powers, and himself doing some high-speed thinking.

Of course Chew's plan was now clear as crystal. Here at his home were the gentleman and lady directly involved in the scorched trousers episode. It was obvious that they would accompany Lawyer Chew and his wife to the public meeting whereat the winner of the scenario contest was to be announced.

There would be a great hullabaloo when Lawyer Chew was recognized as the original of the unfortunate attorney in the story—and then he, as a magnificent gesture, would laugh as heartily as the others and very flagrantly introduce to all and sundry the lady and her husband.

“One thing is certain shuah,” admitted Semore grudgingly. “What Lawyer Chew has got in his head is brains.”

The plan was magnificently simple and superbly sound. It appeared to Semore that he had been outwitted, that Lawyer Chew had proved too adroit for him. But he had a job to do and it was no part of Semore’s scheme to leave a stone unturned. His immediate task was to enter his scenario and see that it won first prize. The Whittles could be attended to later.

He sought Christopher P. S. Shoots, editor of the local colored weekly newspaper, and offered to split fifty-fifty with that gentleman for authoring the scenario under his own name. Christopher P. S. Shoots was excessively agreeable and immediately commenced hammering his battered old typewriter.

The following morning he delivered the script at the studio of the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. Semore arrived a half hour

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later to find the Messrs. Orifice R. Latimer and J. Cæsar Clump completely snowed under by a last-minute avalanche of manuscripts.

They were laboring earnestly and sincerely—and with a last forlorn hope flickering sadly. Semore located the Shoots manuscript and labeled it with the numerals 837, immersed himself in it for a few moments, and then flashed to his feet with a loud whoop.

"Hot diggity dawg!" he howled. "Ise got it!"

"Got which?"

"The winnin' scenario. A whamdoodler! The dawg-gondest slickest story Midnight ever trifled with. Listen——"

Mr. Mashby struck an attitude. And then with impassioned dramatic fervor he read Mr. Shoots' graphic story of Lawyer Chew's searing experience. Before he was finished the harried officials were smiling and when the tag was announced, they fairly shrieked with glee.

"Sufferin' Tripe!" chuckled Cæsar Clump, his eye twinkling professionally. "That wins all the fust prizes we has got. Think of that wind-up fo' a pitcher: husban' chasin' the fat lawyer an' then 'splainin' that all he was doin' it fo' was to return back his pants. Eat my shirt if that ain't a whingbuzzer!"

The prize was awarded instantly, enthusias-

tically and unanimously. There was only one objection.

"Seems like to me," hazarded President Latimer, "that I has heard rumors 'bout Lawyer Evans Chew having been th'oo somethin' like that."

"Heard! Pff! Ise heard a heap of things. But I don't *know* 'em, do I?"

"Tha's right, Semore—you shuah don't. But if this really was Lawyer Chew——"

"Us don't know nothin'—tha's all. What you think, Cæsar?"

Mr. Clump was first, last and always a director and the picture possibilities of the script made an appeal which was irresistible.

"I votes for," he said positively. "An' I don't mean maybe."

Semore was buoyed by a queer elation as he stepped into the street once again. True, the putting across of his story as the prize winner was not by any means his chief concern, but it was at least a vital step.

"All I has got to do now," he reflected, "is to fix things so them Whittles don't mess things all up—an' they ain't no way to do that. So lemme think."

Whereupon he valiantly attacked the job of accomplishing the impossible. It was not the first time that Mr. Mashby had attempted such

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a task—and never before had the spirit of revenge flamed so magnificently in his shriveled soul.

He circulated through Darktown, absorbing bits of gossip concerning the visitors at the Chew home. No one knew much about them, but he did learn positively that Sis Callie Flukers' information was correct in every detail. In addition to that he learned that they were simple country folk; suddenly his eye brightened and a grin twitched the corners of his lips.

"I b'lieve," he informed himself, "that I is about to have an idea."

He was not wrong. The idea did not come instantly, but when it arrived it was complete in every detail.

Mr. Mashby proceeded carefully. He now had thirty-six hours in which to work, and he stationed himself across the street from the Chew home, hoping to waylay Mr. and Mrs. Whittle when they should emerge for a stroll.

But he was not blessed with luck that afternoon. When they appeared it was in the company of Mrs. Evans Chew. They were chatting amiably and they walked townward. He trailed them as far as the Champion Theater. Mrs. Chew paid their admission fee while Semore slouched disconsolately up the street.

The following morning he was more successful. Lawyer Chew was at work, Mrs. Chew busy with her household duties, and Mr. and Mrs. Whittle left the house for a stroll about the neighborhood.

Semore followed. Two blocks down the street he crossed their path, paused and lifted his shiny derby.

"Mawnin', folks."

They stopped and smiled, obviously pleased at being addressed in so friendly a manner.

"Mawnin'," they chorused.

"This is Mistuh an' Mis' Lijah Whittle fum Mon'gom'ry, ain't it?"

The fact was cheerfully admitted.

"Well, dawg-gone my hide!" exclaimed Semore. "Seems zif that almost makes us relatives. I knows a heap of folks in Mon'gom'ry."

"No! 'Tain't possible."

"Suttinly is. Tha's right where they lives at." He appeared to do some deep thinking. "How long you folks gwine be in Bummin-ham?"

"'Til t'morrow mawnin'." Mrs. Lijah Whittle was beaming. "Us is headed fo' St. Louis where Lijah has al'ready got him a good job."

"What you-all doin' to-night?"

"Lawyer Chew an' wife is takin' us to The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise hall. They

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is gwine be some sort of a jubilee down there.”

“Uh-huh—shuah is—” This made matters certain. Semore proceeded to do a bit of acting. “Now ain’t that just the toughest luck?” he moaned. “There coul’n’t nothin’ in the world be no tougher.”

Mrs. Whittle was impressed. “What you mean: tough?”

“’Bout you-all leavin’ to-morrow.”

“How come?”

“Well, you see, it’s thisaway,” confided Semore. “I was thinkin’ of goin’ to St. Louis on a li’l’ trip myse’f an’ I went an’ bought me two tickets fo’ this afternoon’s train—an’ now I ’scovers that I cain’t go an’ them tickets is jus’ lyin’ idle. So I got me the idea that as us sort of is ol’ friends—me knowin’ so many folks in Mon’gom’ry an’ all—that maybe if you could use ’em, I’d give them two tickets to you as a present, free gracious fo’ nothin’.”

“What!” The Whittles were staggered. “You offers us two free tickets to St. Louis?”

“Uh-huh. You suttinly is welcome to ’em. On’y trouble is that you’d have to use ’em this afternoon. They won’t be no good to-morrow.”

Mr. Whittle looked at Mrs. Whittle and Mrs. Whittle looked at Mr. Whittle. Two absolutely free tickets to St. Louis! It was stu-



pendous: magnificent. They held a brief and hurried conference, and decided unanimously that this was an offer too golden to be rejected.

"Us accepts, Mistuh Mashby—an' what we feels fo' you is grachitude."

"Fine. Always glad to he'p out folks fum Mon'gom'ry. But listen——" he lowered his voice and glanced around as though fearful of eavesdroppers—"You got to gimme yo' word an' honor that you don't say nothin' to nobody 'bout this: specially Lawyer an' Mis' Chew."

"But Mistuh Mashby——"

"Don't but me, folks. You has got to promise positivel. You see, it's thisaway: what I was goin' to St. Louis fo' was a business trip, an' Ise goin' later anyway. But if local folks—an' 'specially Lawyer Chew—was to learn about that, they'd ruin the deal I got on foot. So you got to gimme yo' secrecy."

The promise was given. "Jus' leave the Chews a letter," prompted Semore—"a nice polite letter splainin' that you nachelly coul'n't wait a minute longer an' you hope they has a good time at the meetin' to-night." He grinned. "I suttinly woul'n't forget that part 'bout enjoyin' the meetin', either. Us all wants Lawyer Chew to have a puffec'ly swell time."

They took a long walk together: and throughout its course Semore used all of his

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persuasive powers to impress upon them the importance of keeping their exodus a secret until they were safely aboard the northbound train.

He left them to hustle downtown to the ticket office where, with only slight reluctance, he parted with \$35.96 for two tickets from Birmingham to St. Louis. Semore was not overly fond of separating himself from money—but after all, this was a trivial item in the debit column. The credit list showed one large gob of sweet vengeance and his half of the \$250 prize money which was to be divided between himself and Christopher P. S. Shoots. Of course his pet scheme—the five-year lease with Midnight—had been thwarted, but this comeback was sufficiently tasty to make up for many things.

Just before noon Semore delivered the two tickets to Mr. and Mrs. Whittle. Lijah stared pop-eyed, and even now the Whittles refused to believe this miracle possible.

Semore once again impressed upon them the importance of secrecy, and that afternoon, when Mrs. Chew went shopping, they departed quietly. Semore met them downtown and they entrusted to him a note addressed to Lawyer and Mrs. Chew, wherein their regrets were vividly expressed.

"You'll give that to him, shuah, Mistuh Mashby?"

Semore chuckled. "I ain't gwine do nothin' else. In pusson—tha's how I delivers these kind of 'pawtant letters."

Until train time Mr. Mashby did not desert his post. He was fearful lest some last-minute disaster disrupt his beautiful scheme. But at length he saw them safely on board the train, they waved good-bys at each other—and the train pulled out. Mr. Mashby fled to the sanctuary of a near-by alley where he executed his own grotesque interpretation of a Greek dance.

"Hot diggity dawg! Hot diggity dig! They's gone-gone-gone! Oh, Lawsy—Oh, sweet patootie! What Lawyer Chew is gwine say——"

It was perhaps the supreme moment of Brother Mashby's misanthropic life. Revenge—sweet, dainty revenge—conceived in his very own brain and executed pussonal—Glorious! And more glorious when one paused to consider that the person against whom his cunning was directed was that dusky dignitary who was reputed to possess the vastest intelligence in all colored Birmingham.

Anticipation of Chew's supreme confoundment fairly dazzled Semore Mashby. His at-

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tenuated frame quivered with eagerness for the meeting that night. He wanted to see Lawyer Chew when the gentleman entered the hall—worried, harassed—perhaps terrified. Mr. Mashby walked into Bud Peaglar's Barbecue Lunch Room and Billiard Parlor and consumed a large bowl of Brunswick stew, two pieces of pie and a cup of steaming coffee. Rank extravagance, of course, but Semore was in a celebrating humor.

Announcement of the prize winner was to be made at eight o'clock. An hour before that time the lodge rooms of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise were crowded to suffocation. There was an atmosphere of tense expectancy: each person present nourished a fierce hope that he or she was the lucky contestant. Some one of them was to be crowned with the laurel wreath of successful literary achievement; a miasma of eager gossip and frantic conjecture hung over the gathering: eyes were focused with painful earnestness upon the three judges who posed importantly on the rostrum.

At ten minutes before eight o'clock there was a stir as Lawyer and Mrs. Evans Chew shouldered through the crowd to their reserved seats. Chew appeared rather bewildered and Semore observed that the lawyer's eyes were

searching the room. Immediately the little money lender descended from the platform.

"Lawyer Chew," he grinned, "I has got a letter fo' you."

Chew ripped it open and read:

dere mrs & Lawyer Chew:

we sure hate to beat it this way specially after you hav treated us so good but a feler give us 2 free tickets to saint louis good this afternoon only and what could we do with thanks an all good wishes we are

mrs & mr lijah whittle

An emotion which was not pleasure was plainly reflected upon the face of the attorney. Once or twice his lips opened and closed again; then his voice came in guttural accusal.

"Semore Mashby—you done this."

"Well, hush my mouf! Listen at the big feller talk."

"You tooken my gues's an' dispirited them away fum right under my nose."

"Sweet Shades of Nitre! Believin' I would do somethin' like that!"

"You has played me dirty fum the fust off," growled Chew. "Some time I gits even with you."

"Yah—breeze which you wastes. Lemme tell you somethin', Ol' Burn-Pants—right heah

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in Bumminham is a feller which his middle name is Bad Medicine, an' his other two names is Semore Mashby."

Semore swung on his heel and strutted proudly back to the platform. The evening promised to be large and he was drinking deep from the chalice of happiness. There was no mistaking Chew's discomfiture: Semore saw the big man fall into earnest conversation with his wife. "Reckon what they is sayin' 'bout me ain't so complimentin'—but a man which fools with a buzz saw is suttinly libel to git burnt. Guess they di'n't call me a financial wizzid fo' nothin'."

At eight o'clock sharp the meeting was called to order. President Orifice R. Latimer waddled to the front of the stage and emitted a flowery peroration which presumed to trace the course of literature's development from a rather pallid beginning to this present high-watermark of Midnight's two-hundred-fifty-dollar scenario contest. He exhibited twenty-five new ten-dollar gold pieces. He detailed the travail of the three judges and their indefatigable labors—and announced that even yet the name of the winner was unknown.

He explained that he was about to read the winning scenario so that each and every person present could see that it had been selected



solely on merit. At the conclusion of the reading the name of the winner would be taken from the envelope bearing the same number as that which appeared at the head of the winning synopsis.

And then, quite impressively, he began:

"This heah story is entitled 'The Fatal Orange.' It goes thisaway: 'Once upon a time there was a gal which her father run a fruit stand and she was crazy about oranges, all the time eating them, which ruint his profits, and she had a lover which owned a flivver and hated oranges, so it di'n't seem like they could ever be happy an'——'"

Semore's muscles became taut. He blinked rapidly several times and cocked his head on one side. It occurred to him that something was wrong. Certainly Mr. Christopher P. S. Shoots had not presumed to make fruitful the episode of Lawyer Chew's cremated pants! Surely there had been an error. He gave ear to the further reading of the winning script.

"'. . . an' so when she is going out riding this night with her feller she takes one dozen oranges along in case she gets hungry, but she does not know what he has done to them oranges . . . .'"

Ever since the moment when Latimer's mellifluous voice started reading the manuscript



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there had been a growing commotion in the rear of the hall. At this stage of the reading, it crescendoed into an uproar and suddenly there came a loud and hysterical feminine shriek:

"Glory, glory hallelujah! Tha's my story! Tha's the story I writ!"

Instantly the reading was drowned out by a scraping of chairs as people climbed for a view of the lucky contestant.

Semore Mashby did not rise. He did not even hear the howls of, "It's Mis' Simeon Broughton! Mis' Simeon Broughton has done won herse'f two hund'ed an' fifty dollars cash money!" Semore heard none of that; he saw none of the excitement. All that penetrated his consciousness was the fact that an excruciating disaster had occurred and all he could see was the placid face of Lawyer Evans Chew.

The reading of the script was never completed. Mrs. Broughton was surrounded and showered with congratulations. President Latimer opened the envelope containing the name of the author and verified her recognition of her own story—whereupon he paid into her hand the two hundred and fifty dollars. There was a general rush for the door: a chattering and babel of tongues—and none of them

saw the little figure of Semore Mashby suddenly galvanize into action.

He darted across the platform and circled the arms of his co-judges with steely fingers. He was perspiring freely and quivering with outrage.

"Wha's this! What has you fellers went an' done? That ain't the scenario which won the prize!"

"Semore Mashby! You is crazy as you looks. Suttinly it won the prize. Di'n't you see us pay same in cash?"

"Yeh—but us voted fo' the one about the fat lawyer gittin' his pants burned." A fourth figure joined the group—a figure large and impressive and smiling triumphantly. Lawyer Evans Chew posed—and said nothing.

"Shuah!" Latimer was willing to explain. "We voted fo' that burned pants story, but we changed our minds. All day long we has been tryin' to git in touch with you, but you wasn't nowheres to be foun'. An' so we voted best two out of th'ee fo' this orange thing."

"Yeh—yeh! But why? It ain't near as good."

"Suttinly it ain't. We know that as well as you. But to-day about noon us gits a letter fum a prominent an' well-known lawyer, tellin' us that it has come to his attention that we in-

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tends to give a prize 'bout a lawyer gittin' his pants burned an' a jealous husban' chasin' him, an' the letter also enclosed a summons an' complaint which the lawyer says will be filed immedjit with the Clerk of Court does we award the prize to said scenario. An' that summons an' complaint, Semore, was a damage suit fo' ten thousan' dollars—an' us woul'n't take no chances."

Semore turned a haggard face to the grinning countenance of Lawyer Evans Chew.

"Wh-wha-what lawyer written that letter, Mistuh Latimer?"

"Evans Chew!"

"B-b-but it wasn't nothin' but a bluff. He coul'n't sue us——"

"Mebbe he coul'n't," came the positive answer. "But that lady could an' also her husban'. An' befo' they lef' Bumminham to-day, they signed that complaint against us, so all Lawyer Chew had to do was file same an' we was all set to git busted loose fum a heap of good cash."

Semore slumped: physically and spiritually. The extent of his disaster was penetrating; but most bitter of all was the knowledge that Chew had achieved his purpose—that at the moment he was purchasing two tickets to St. Louis the

signature of the Whittles had already been affixed to the documents.

The deep, earnest voice of Lawyer Evans Chew broke in upon his silent misery.

"You shuah have got one thing to be thankful fo', Brother Mashby."

Semore raised his head hopefully.

"What is that, Lawyer Chew?"

"You shuah ought to be grateful that them folks wasn't movin' to San Francisco!"

The End

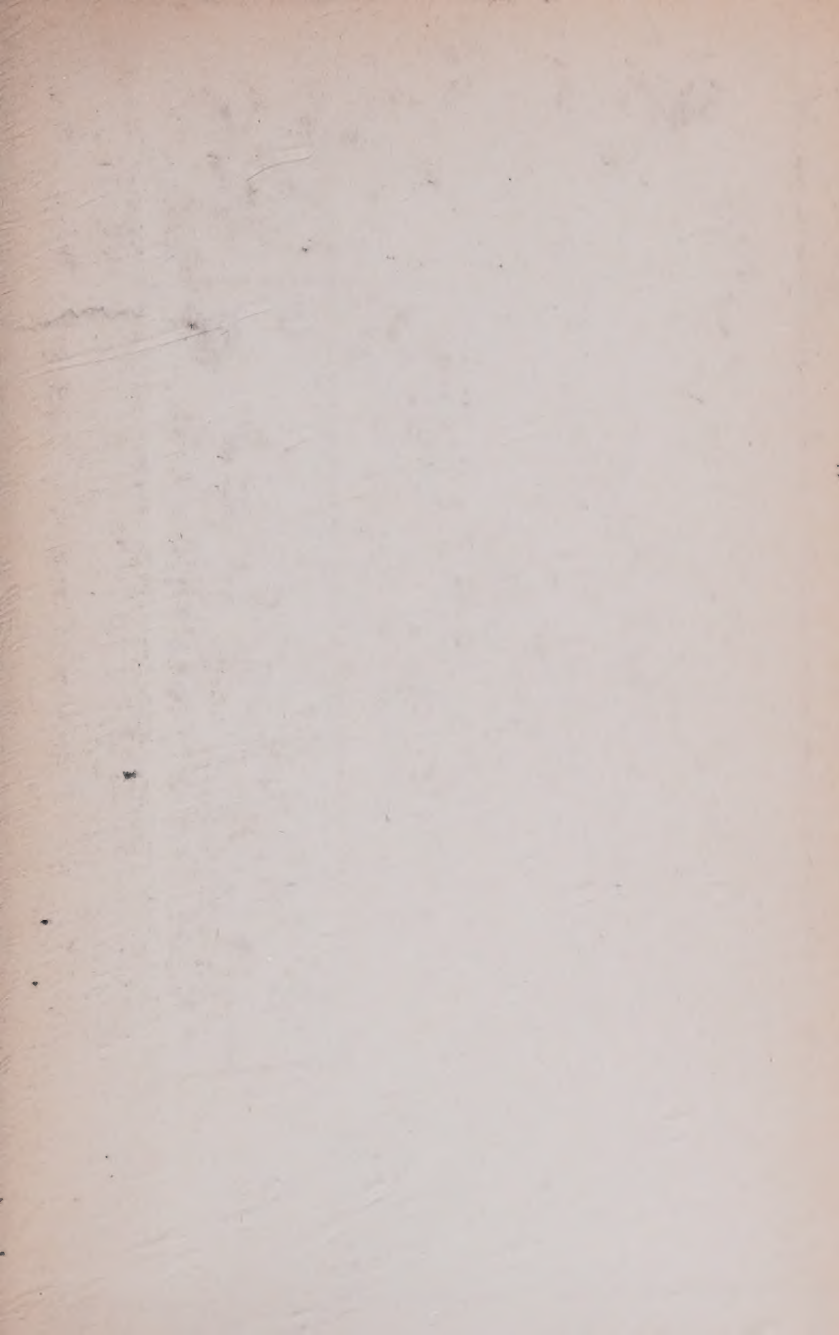
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